

# Diverging Paths

by makoto140

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Summary: A dutiful pureblood demon noble, a stubborn assassin, and a crossdressing soldier become entangled in the lives of the Shinsengumi. In the process, these three girls find themselves more deeply involved with certain members than they bargained for. OCxKazama, OCxHijikata, OCxOkita.

## 1. Chapter 1: Savior

### Author's Note:

This story contains three main OCs, and frequently changes POVs between the three of them.

This chapter is from Sae's POV.

I don't own Hakuoki or any of its characters.

Reviews and criticisms and welcome and appreciated!

### Chapter 1: Savior

\_THWOK!\_

The soothing sound of the arrow piercing its target reverberated over the grounds, causing a flock of starlings to scatter to the sky. Her aim was off today- she had only managed to hit the outer circle, just nearly preventing herself from missing the target completely. She plucked another arrow from its cloth casing and drew back the bowstring, her right arm trembling. Minding the careful positioning of her feet and back, she let out a slow breath and allowed the string to soar from her grasp, sending the arrow flying. This time it found its home in the area just above the center of the target.

Sae Tsukishima lifted her head in satisfaction. Though archery was a skill she'd been honing since childhood, she had begun to see signs

of progress now that she had acquired the patience to find solace in the sport.

She reached for another arrow, the tips of her fingers gliding over the soft feather lining, when the sound of her father's disgruntled voice echoed from the front entrance of her house. Her hand froze and she tilted her head, straining to make out words. Kei Tsukishima- her father as well as the head of the Tsukishima demon clan- was definitely perturbed by something, though she failed to decipher his troubled rumblings. Abandoning the bow and arrows to the grass, she trekked across the small field to the back entrance of the house, stealthily sliding open the thin door and leaning her head beside the narrow opening.

"No, I'm sorry," she heard, her father's voice desperate now. "Please leave."

Sae pushed the door aside a bit more, hastily squeezing herself through the gap. Though she couldn't see the entrance from here- such spacious living quarters allowed the two entrances to be a couple rooms apart- there was no doubt that it must be another suitor. She sidled up to the wall of the room adjacent to the entrance, straining to catch just a snippet of the conversation. Being one of the few known pureblood female demons inevitably earned her several suitors, despite still being prohibited to pursue any one of them. Eighteen years of age was by far enough to warrant a consideration, but her parents seemed to have other plans in mind. These plans seemed to involve driving away any potential future husband.

It did nothing to stop her curiosity. Many times, just like today, she would listen for the sound of the male demon's voice, and took joy in imagining a face fit to match it.

Today she was far too late. The only sound Sae managed to hear was the front doors sliding shut with a \_snap\_.

"Perhaps we might have been able to help . . ." Her mother's gentle voice was barely audible, even through the paper doors.

"It's not wise to associate with rogue demons." her father said, his stern tone indicating that the discussion was clearly over. "It'll be fine."

Sae frowned. This didn't sound like the typical visitor. Donning a nonchalant expression, she slid open the door to join her parents in the front room, announcing her presence with a casual sigh. "Another one?"

Her father blinked, and her mother seemed to be caught off guard. After a second of stunned silence, she composed herself. "Yes, of course. They come in droves, don't they?" Rina Tsukishima forced a smile. It was slightly frightening how well her mother was able to blatantly lie- if she hadn't allowed herself time to recover, Sae might have believed it.

"So . . ." Sae trailed her mother to the kitchen, her socks sliding slightly on the polished wooden floor. "Mother, if I may so boldly ask, what was this one like?"

Without even a backward glance, her mother returned to chopping

vegetables. A stray hair had worked its way out of her tightly wrapped bun, and now swayed with every chop, the dark shade of brown so similar to her own. "What was he like? The usual. Why do you ask?" Her tone was dangerous- any further prodding would already result in verbal admonishment.

Sae gulped, debating on whether or not to push on. She knew their evening visitor was not one of their regulars- neglecting to ask now would likely result in curiosity eating away at her throughout the night. "I'm merely inquiring as to-"

"Sae. Pick up your archery equipment." Her father swooped in to save his wife further exasperation. Sae's jaw snapped shut, and she turned on her heels to head back outside. Disobeying her father would only result in misfortune- answers to her questions were not worth the risk by far.

The sun was just beginning its descent as she slipped on her sandals and stepped outside, the song of the crickets growing louder by the minute. Grass crunched beneath her feet, and she scooped up her bow and arrow case on the way to the target, letting them dangle from her shoulder. She yanked one arrow out of the target and slid it back among the others, the thin material allowing little resistance. Gripping the other arrow with a clenched fist, she had only just started to pull when a sudden noise forced her to a halt.

Someone was nearby. The unmistakable sound of labored breathing was coming from beside the trunk of a tall tree, the encroaching darkness offering the stranger protection from her prying eyes. Sae squinted, her body frozen in fear, and she began to make out a silhouette as her eyes adjusted to the imminent night sky. The unknown figure was so small that they could have easily been anything- it was the breathing that alarmed her.

Sae turned, quietly twisting the nearly forgotten arrow from its target, and held it tightly in her dominant hand, her bow gripped within her left. She considered simply going back inside- on any other day, this would be her usual course of action. But her parents' previous conversation concerned her. From the tidbits that she'd overheard, their recent visitor was a "rogue demon" who "perhaps needed their help". It was unlikely that the appearance of this stranger was merely a coincidence.

It looked like she might be getting her answers after all.

Step by step, she walked toward the crouched figure, raising her quaking arm to hold the bow vertically in front of her. By the time she was within a few feet of the stranger, her bowstring was pulled taut, an arrow aimed toward the unknown person's chest. It was no wonder the figure was barely visible- being clothed in black from head to toe created perfect camouflage for the night shadows. Only a pair of piercing red eyes peeked out from the black cloth covering the head.

Sae was scarcely able to draw breath before the stranger spoke.

"Just let me stay for a few more minutes." The fierce whisper clearly belonged to a female- Sae nearly dropped her weapon upon hearing it. The voice was pleading. "I . . . just need to hide."

It was then that Sae noticed the girl was clutching one small hand closely to her stomach- her dark clothes concealed any growing stain, but her pale hands were unable to hide the red liquid pouring from her wound. Blood.

Now the bow and arrows were on the ground. "A-aaah!" Sae cried, involuntarily taking several steps back. She turned away from the sight, her body cringing. "I'll go fetch some bandages!"

She offered to help as an excuse to get away more than anything- one more glimpse of the sticky red substance would send her reeling. Nevertheless, distance did little to stifle her urge to find bandages. She had no idea how long the girl had been bleeding- at this point, whether or not she decided to help her could make the difference between living or dying.

Sae sprinted back into the house, her urgency causing her shoes to remain on her feet despite being indoors, and tore open the living room closet. She rummaged among the family's belongings, pushing aside several blankets and other miscellaneous household objects. Her parents' calm voices drifted from the other side of the house- she sighed in relief. They were still in the kitchen.

Her hand finally landed on the smooth fabric of bandages, and she shoved it gratefully inside of her kimono sleeve, feeling the weight of it as it dropped to the bottom. She darted back outside, her wooden sandals scratching on the tatami mats, and nearly tripped over herself when she saw what was in front of her.

The black-clad girl was a blur of motion now, the glimmer of light reflecting from her katana being the only indication of her movement. There was another stranger added to her predicament- a dark-haired male with no discernable features, recklessly slashing away at the injured girl with a sword of his own. Despite the rather large gash in her stomach, the female fighter managed to dodge all of his swings, before quickly maneuvering behind him and bringing the edge of her weapon to her opponent's bare neck.

"S-stop-" Sae gasped, and for a moment air was a foreign substance- she felt as though she were breathing it in quite a bit, yet not a single breath seemed to do any good. It was all happening far too fast, without a second to spare for comprehension.

The sharp blade glided over the man's neck, his skin seemingly as thin as silk, and blood gushed from the cut and down the front of his chest like a small crimson waterfall. His pupils craned upward to the rising moon before retreating back into his skull, and the gurgling only stopped when the girl released him from her grasp, letting his face collide with the dirt.

No words would come to her- Sae could only stare at the lifeless form on the ground, her mouth perpetually open in silent shock. At some point her legs had given out, and she was kneeling in the grass, the sleeves of her indigo kimono fanned out on either side of her.

"Sorry . . ." The girl said, slightly swaying to and fro. Her voice was so weak that it could be mistaken for the wind on the trees. ". . . had a job to do . . ."

With that the girl collapsed, the light leaving her pale red eyes.

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The morning sun wormed its way into the small cracks between doors, its light gradually pushing up Sae's eyelids bit by bit. It was daylight again, though the day had been slow to come- the night before seemed to have lasted three full days, with each beginning with waking up and checking on the slumbering assassin by her side. Several times she believed the girl to be dead, but was proven wrong each time upon hearing the faint heartbeat in her chest. These occurrences would relieve her enough to return to sleep, but not without a fitful rest.

Pushing herself up to a sitting position, Sae scooted over to the small girl, finding comfort in the small rise and fall of her chest. She seemed to be recovering, though she had no way to tell when the stranger would wake up- she had bet everything on this occurrence happening soon, so as to avoid alerting her parents to her secret visitor. Her mother and father's habit of barging into her room unannounced had luckily seemed to take a reprieve the night before, and she had managed to keep the girl undetected in her room since then.

Sae watched the unconscious stranger for a few more moments, staring in bewilderment once again at the girl's small stature. It was difficult to believe that such a tiny girl could so easily put down an adult male- especially while suffering from an injury. She wondered- perhaps for the hundredth time- if she had made a mistake in deciding to shelter her. She knew nothing about her and could very well declare murder as her hobby. Yet she was simply so frail. Perhaps it was due to this newcomer being the only fellow female that Sae had ever met besides her mother, but she felt the need to stand by her side.

Her eyes wandered to the dark cloth wrapped around the top of the girl's head, concealing her hair. She had been forced to remove the fabric covering her nose and mouth so as to provide ample room to breathe, but every other part of her remained untouched. Now Sae's hand drifted toward the cloth, securing it between the tips of two fingers and lifting it up only an inch.

It was a sight that caused her heart to stop for a moment, her arm frozen in place. She blinked several times but the result was always the same.

The girl's hair was the color of the sun. The texture seemed fluffy and soft, like the fur of an animal, though Sae couldn't confirm this herself- it was only a second after her hair was revealed that the girl's eyes flickered open.

"Oh!" Sae's hand shot back to her side as if the stranger's hair was made of flames. She opened her mouth to apologize but no words would come- though she doubted the girl paid her any mind. She sat up with such intense speed that Sae was surprised the movement didn't cause her wound to ache.

"Where am I?" she asked, her gaze skittering desperately over every

part of her surroundings in search of a clue. Her voice, although still light, almost seemed loud in comparison with the quiet morning air.

"You're in my room." Sae replied, keeping her voice to a whisper. It was unlikely that her parents were awake yet- she hoped it would remain this way. She leaned in close to peer into the girl's eyes, hoping her expression was a gentle one. "You fainted."

This caused her new acquaintance to stop short, her dilated pupils staring back at her in shock. "Did you save me?"

Sae nodded. It was no easy task- any prolonged period of time in the presence of blood made her nauseous, and she was forced to take so many breaks to recover that she was surprised she had been any help to the girl at all. The bandages seemed to do very little to stop the flow, though she seemed to heal up just fine in any case- any blood still remaining on the bandages had long dried by now.

As if reading her mind, the girl's hands wandered to the bandages wrapped sloppily around her waist, hastily beginning to unravel the stained material from her body.

"Wait just a moment-!" Sae begged, the repulsive memories from last night threatening to rise to her conscious once again. She didn't know how much progress the injury had made overnight- she didn't dare reveal the laceration once it was safely concealed from her view.

The bandages fell from the girl's stomach, unveiling a thin dark line just under her navel. Torn black cloth around her waist was the only sign of a fight. The resilient body of a demon had worked its magic once again- the grievous wound from the night before had almost disappeared completely.

"Oh, good." Sae said in relief, a hand to her chest. "You're-"

"\_You can't tell anyone\_." The girl turned a fierce glare on Sae, her red eyes sparkling with menace. Her voice was no more than a whisper, but it was as threatening as if she had screamed it.

Her words caught in her throat, Sae gulped. She had no idea what she was ordered not to tell- That she killed someone? That she got injured? That she was here?- nor did she care. No matter what it was, she wouldn't say a word. After all, her neck was on the line as well- nobody could know she secretly housed and aided an injured murderer. "I won't tell a soul."

Seemingly satisfied, the girl looked away, her gaze shifting to her unsheathed katana laying at her side. The blade was dyed red with death, and it took Sae holding it by the handle with two fingers to transport it into her room. The sheathe lay beside it.

"If I may ask . . ." Sae began carefully, interrupting the brief period of silence. The girl turned to make eye contact, blinking herself out of deep thought. "What clan are you from?"

The length of silence only stretched longer. The girl only stared at her blankly, a bit of her golden hair still poking out from underneath the dark garment adorning her head.

" . . . or perhaps you're of the Nagumo clan?" Sae continued, treading even more carefully. She had almost forgotten that she could be a rogue demon- she could either have been banished from any clan, or she could be of Nagumo origin, in which every single member is classified as a rogue. She hoped this wasn't the case. Nagumo had a terrible reputation, though she couldn't verify if any of the rumors were true.

". . . clan?" The girl finally spoke, her eyes narrowing in confusion.

"Yes, your clan. Your demon clan." Sae said patiently. The girl's eyes widened, and she examined her own hands in thought. Sae waited for a few moments before pushing on. Her words almost seemed to be making the girl uncomfortable- or strangely enough, confused. "Or perhaps you'd rather not say. That's quite all right." She shifted to sitting on her knees before giving a polite bow. "I'm Sae Tsukishima, of the Tsukishima clan. It's nice to meet you."

"You're a demon too?" The girl asked, her eyes growing to an even larger size.

Sae frowned. Now she was puzzled. "Why of course. Don't you know?" she smiled, lifting her hands to gesture to the area around her. "You're still on demon land."

The assassin blinked several times in shock, before abruptly seeming to shake it off. She bended into a bow, though hers extended much lower than her own. "I'm Satomi Sayashi. I owe you a great debt for saving my life."

"Oh, it was no trouble at all!" Sae assured her, though she actually had gone through quite a bit of trouble within the past night. She nervously looked behind her to the back entrance, where the previous day's events occurred. "Though if you'd like to repay me, you can start by disposing of your . . . kill outside. You see, I'd be in an enormous predicament if anyone were to find-"

Satomi was up and out of the door in a millisecond, her form disappearing outside before Sae could even complete her request. She stifled a laugh- the girl was a fast worker.

She spent her time waiting for Satomi's return by pondering over the last few minutes. "Sayashi?" she thought, tapping one fingernail idly on the tip of her chin. No such clan existed- that much was obvious. However, there was no question that she was a demon. The speed of her recovery from such a large wound rivaled even that of her own. That only left the possibility that she was lying about her last name. The only question left was why.

Footsteps padded down the hall to her room, and Sae threw herself over the futon to brush the bloodied katana and sheathe under the blankets, the metal clanging against each other. The door slid open just as she straightened up again, forcing herself to maintain a composed manner.

Her father's expression was uncharacteristically nervous, with a touch of pure bafflement. The look on his face was so unlike him that Sae almost wondered if he somehow knew about the happenings of the

night before, or if she'd left some incriminating evidence lying around her room somewhere.

"Sae. There's . . . someone here to see you." he said, before quickly turning away and returning to the front room, his pace unnaturally swift.

Her heart pounded in her chest. "\_Someone here to see me?\_" Sae thought, standing up and frantically patting down the wrinkles from last night's kimono, grateful that she was far too worried about Satomi to bother undressing. Flecks of blood littered some areas of the fabric, though they were barely noticeable and could be mistaken for part of the design- she hoped. She combed her fingers through her hair, grabbing the nearest tie she could find and tying up the back of her hair near the bottom in her typical style. "\_Why now?!\_"

There was only one reason why anyone would come to see her whilst her dad looked so utterly petrified- her parents were finally letting her see a suitor. Her heart hammered even harder, and she cursed the fact that last night had caused her so little sleep- she could only imagine what she looked like.

Sae entered the hallway, shutting her bedroom doors tightly behind her. She prayed that Satomi would stay hidden upon returning from her task. Taking a deep breath, she headed toward the front room, lifting her head high in false confidence.

Through the opening from the hallway, only her parents were visible at first. Her father was sitting up straight in perfect posture, his mood stiff. Her mother was setting down five steaming cups of tea, avoiding eye contact from any direction. It became more and more difficult to control her breathing as Sae neared the room.

The person sitting near her parents was not the person she was expecting to see.

"Princess Sen?!" Sae scrambled to the ground, pressing herself to the floor in a deep bow.

The princess's giggle was like a lullaby. "There's no need for that!" she laughed, her manner of speech indicating she was already a good friend- though this was the first time Sae had ever seen her in person. Sae lifted herself to a sitting position, though she still couldn't manage to look the princess in the eye. "In fact, I should be bowing to you! You see, I actually have a huge favor to ask of you, Sae Tsukishima!"

## 2. Chapter 2: A Choice To Make

Author's Note:

Reviews and criticisms welcome and appreciated!

This chapter is from Satomi's POV

Chapter 2: A Choice To Make

The cold February air bit into her skin, invaded her lungs. A thin



layer of sweat began to form on her body, though it only seemed to chill her even more. The low temperatures combined with the glare of the morning sun dealt a heavy blow- Satomi was panting by the time she managed to drag the target of her latest assignment to the bushes of a secluded area. This would be her victim's final resting place- the daylight had robbed her of the energy required to do much more.

It was doubtful that he would ever be found here, in any case. Satomi rubbed her dirtied hands on her clothes, scanning the immense horde of trees around her. The Tsukishima house was only a speck in the distance from her current location, yet there was still no sign of visible life on either side of her- she really was in the middle of nowhere.

"How did I manage to get all the way out here last night . . . ?" Satomi sighed to herself, wiping sweat from her brow. She kicked another pile of dirt over the motionless corpse before turning back to the house, relieved that her most recent client had decided to pay her in advance. It was unlikely she'd want to leave Sae's side after the previous day's catastrophe, at least not until she felt her debt was adequately repaid.

Remembering her near failure caused her to wince. Until now she had considered herself quite skilled at what she did- Get assigned a target, kill them, get paid, repeat. Last night was the first time she found the tables turned. After a minor blunder \_she\_ had become the prey, and a near fatal blow to the gut sent her fleeing to the forest, her attacker hot on her trail. She never imagined it would lead her to demon territory.

Satomi had heard of the demons of Japan- reclusive people who hid deep in the woods, far from human contact. She had once chased these rumors herself, searching the forests night after night with no success, trying in vain to find just a member of her own species. She had heard stories that they do not weaken in sunlight, nor do they thirst for blood, two advantages Satomi could not attribute to herself, much to her misery. Her western origin was apparently the cause of this misfortune, and she had spent her whole life coping with it. Even now the light of day seemed to gradually push her down as she neared the Tsukishima residence, and she gratefully flopped onto the futon upon entering Sae's room.

Only a moment of rest was allowed before Satomi noticed the pervasive silence coating the room. She lifted her head to find that she was alone- her new demon friend was nowhere to be found. What's more, a rigid object was poking her ribs from underneath the blankets. Frowning, she dragged herself up to a sitting position and tugged her katana out from underneath the covers, its blade shoved snugly into its dark sheathe.

"\_What a shame\_." she thought, sliding the sharp metal from its home to examine it. "\_Sheathing it while it's dirty had likely ruined it . . . \_"

Satomi shook her head, willing herself to focus. Sae was gone.

She stood, approaching the door that led to the hallway. It was firmly closed- it was likely her host had simply been called away for an errand. Nevertheless, she pressed her ear to the door, listening

for signs of life, but was unnerved by the eerie silence permeating the household.

Crossing her arms, Satomi debated on her next course of action. Staying put would give her a greater possibility of remaining hidden, and therefore keeping Sae out of trouble as well. However, she had only just promised Sae mere minutes ago that she owed her her life- how could she possibly repay her when she couldn't even keep an eye on her? Sneaking through the house and assessing Sae's location and condition while preventing herself from being caught was the solution to both problems- and the riskiest.

"\_Why am I even thinking about this? I'm a ninja! If I can't sneak around properly, then what good am I?\_" She thought, taking a deep breath. Last night was unfortunate, but she couldn't suffer a blow to her confidence now. Her sluggishness during the day combined with her suspicious hair color assured her that she couldn't acquire a job doing much else- this was the one occupation she had to be exceptional at.

Inching open the door, Satomi tiptoed into the hallway, her footsteps noiseless. Every hair on her body stood on end, every muscle taut. This frame of mind was specifically reserved for when she was working- at these times she was like an animal closing in on her prey, every movement coolly calculated to make the least amount of noise possible. Her toes never stayed on the floor for more than a second- she could choose to take the slow and steady method, or the quick and stealthy one. This time she had to be fast.

The hushed tones of a tense conversation could finally be heard as she neared the front of the house. A lone open door signaled that the members of this exchange resided in the entrance room, and she came to a stop a few feet before it, in case she needed to make a quick escape should anyone suddenly exit. Satomi bent to a crouch and hugged her knees, leaning her weight on the wall behind her. This would allow her to remain in this position for a long period of time without losing her balance or becoming uncomfortable.

". . . a Choshu spy who had infiltrated the Shinsengumi a few days ago revealed that they're housing a young female who claims her father is Kodo \_Yukimura\_."

The voice was unfamiliar, though Satomi could tell it belonged to a woman. "\_Perhaps that is Sae's mother.\_" she ventured. But then another woman spoke- a more likely candidate to be Sae's mother, as the voice was a bit deeper, more refined.

"Yukimura?!" the older woman said, disbelief coating her words. "\_The \_Yukimura clan?"

"Impossible!" a man shouted. Sae's father. She recognized the voice from the night before- he had turned her away when she asked for shelter. "They've all been wiped out! Anyone remaining would have blood so diluted that they can scarcely call themselves demons."

"That is what we thought." the younger female replied, unperturbed by the father's violent rejection. "But not everyone is convinced. Now, you're aware that the Kazama, Amagiri, and Shiranui clans are involved in the war against the shogun, correct?"

"Yes . . ." Sae's father said warily. "I hope you're not expecting us to get involved as well. I've already stated my opinion on it several times."

"No no, not at all!" the unknown girl chirped, and Satomi thought she could hear the flapping of kimono sleeves. "But if this girl is really a pureblood of the Yukimura clan, that can pose some . . . problems. An inside source has informed me that the head of the Kazama clan, Chikage Kazama, has begun neglecting his duties upon hearing of this rumor. He is making plans to interfere with the Shinsengumi as we speak, in order to take the girl away- even to the point of disobeying orders and planning unscheduled attacks on them in his pursuit of a pureblood bride. This is problematic for all of us- such bold insubordination could cause backlash on the demons after so many years of peace."

For once, neither of Sae's parents spoke, and there was a moment of tense contemplation. Satomi was beginning to realize why the demons kept their distance from human activities- it seemed the action of one misguided demon could mean the destruction of all of them.

Satomi was beginning to wonder if Sae was even in the room just as she finally spoke. "So . . . what would you like me to do, Princess Sen?" Her voice was trembling. Satomi could tell that she already had a good idea of what the girl wanted her to do- and wasn't sure if she was fond of it.

"Well, I'm a bit ashamed to even ask this of you, but . . ." the younger girl, or Sen as she was called, began. "Are you currently looking for a possible partner? For future marriage, that is."

Silence. Satomi's jaw dropped, and she had to stifle a gasp. She knew the question was coming, but she still couldn't believe how blatant it was. Her heart went out to her recent savior. A refusal- and she was sure it would be a refusal- was bound to create massive guilt and pressure for anyone after hearing such a tale of misfortune.

Sae's father coughed awkwardly. "We've been somewhat . . . limiting Sae's contact with potential suitors." he admitted.

"I see." Sen replied. Satomi had the feeling just by listening that the princess really did understand- though whether she pitied or related to Sae was indecipherable. "Please let it be known that I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. You have the full right to refuse me. I'd then simply resort to more drastic measures."

"Pardon me if I'm mistaken . . . but are you asking me to marry the head of the Kazama clan?" Sae asked, unable to keep her voice steady. Satomi shook her head. She thought Sae would be a bit quicker on the uptake than that.

"I'm only asking you to test the waters. You can quit or change your mind at any time." Sen assured her. "Should you decide to comply, you would reside with the Shinsengumi until a deal can be made. This is because Chikage Kazama's current whereabouts are unknown- the only information we have is that he is planning to attack their

headquarters. This is where you would come in. It's possible that you can resolve the situation peacefully before any harm can be done."

"Absolutely not!" The father's shout was so deafening that Satomi almost instinctually leapt into the air. "Along with being in the middle of human conflict, there's a delusional demon who's planning to attack and kidnap a girl, and you want my daughter to be in the center of that?! It's too dangerous!"

"I know it's far too much for me to ask. That is why I'm giving you the option to back out." Sen said calmly. "My next attempt at a peaceful solution would be to offer myself. Unfortunately, even I am not completely a pureblood demon." The room was plunged into silence once again, and this time Satomi could hear a smile in her voice as she explained. "My ancestor, Suzuka Gozen, became involved with a human after all."

"I'm sorry, we can't accept." Sae's mother said, and it was doubtful she had even heard Sen at all. "We can't sacrifice our daughter for the Yukimura girl. If such a girl exists and she is being courted by the head of the Kazama clan, then perhaps she should take on that responsibility herself."

When Sen spoke next, the unmistakable presence of ire soaked her words. "Who she chooses is up to her." she said firmly, before softening her voice. "Just as it is also up to Sae, as to who she chooses. Sae, what do you want?"

Another quiet moment of contemplation- Satomi wondered if Sae was used to being asked such a question. Before long, she had an answer.

"I want to help." she said, and Satomi nearly fell backward. "I see no harm in trying."

"A-absolutely not!" Sae's father barked again, his surprise rivaling her own. "It's much too dangerous! Say you're kidnapped by this Kazama fellow- even if you change your mind then, it's too late by that point! You won't be able to come back!"

A brief moment of silence- even Princess Sen didn't seem to have a response to this. Encouraged by the lack of retaliation, Sae's father continued.

"You have no knowledge of how to live in human societies, you have no self-defense skills, and you have no one to protect you. Just how do you plan to help anybody besides getting yourself kidnapped, injured, or killed?"

Satomi's eyes widened, and she subconsciously stood up. Not only did she have self-defense skills, but she had offense skills, and she had been living among humans her entire life. On top of that, wasn't protecting Sae in return for saving her life just what she had planned to do? It was then that she realized it. This was her cue.

"Then I'll be her bodyguard!"

She was in front of the open doorway before she even realized she had

moved. All heads turned simultaneously- Mr. Tsukishima's face was entirely red, his mouth open in shock. Her mother's expression was similar, only her skin was as pale as snow. Sae looked simply mortified, and Sen merely looked as though something slightly interesting just passed her field of vision.

"You . . . how did you . . . but . . . " Sae's father stuttered, his face growing so red that it was becoming mildly concerning.

"Ah, that's a fine idea!" Sen smiled, her eyelids lowering in an expression of contentment.

"I sent you away! Why are you here?!" Sae's father finally managed to spit out.

"It's my fault." Sae said, her head bent down in shame. There was no question that she was of high birth- even in this defeated posture, she still managed to look refined. "I helped her. She was staying in my room."

"She saved my life." Satomi corrected. "I owe her. If she's determined to go, then allow me to be her bodyguard."

She felt the eyes on her before she even knew she was being scrutinized- she turned to see Sae's mother staring at her small frame almost accusingly. Satomi sighed. It wasn't the first time she would be doubted for her stature, nor would it be the last.

"I've been carrying out assassin jobs for years." Satomi assured her. "I can handle it."

"And I expect you're doing this for pay?" Sae's father grumbled, his eyes squinting in suspicion.

Satomi resisted the urge to sigh again. "I offered to do this, didn't I? I'm not looking to get paid for this. I owe her a debt."

Mr. Tsukishima opened his mouth to retort.

"Are you sure about this, Sae?" Sen interrupted. "It's not too late to change your mind."

All attention returned to the daughter of the Tsukishima clan. Sae looked to her father, and then to her mother, blinking back tears that hadn't yet arrived. "Yes. This is something only I can do."

"Oh, I'm so grateful! Then it's settled." Sen said, getting up and patting down the front of her golden yukata. Satomi wasn't sure if she was being cheerful to lighten the somber mood or because she simply didn't notice it. "Please take your time to pack your things. When you're done, we'll begin our trip to Kyoto."

Sae's father stood up as well, pleading to Sen's retreating back. "Wait a minute-"

"Honey!" Mrs. Tsukishima hissed, pulling on her husband's sleeve. "We can't go against Princess Sen. Think of the clan."

Sen must have held an incredible influence- Sae's father was

disgruntled, but he said nothing else.

"I'm sorry . . ." Sae muttered, the sleeve of her kimono muffling her words. This time her dark red eyes were brimming with tears, and she hurried to her room before they threatened to overflow.

l1l1l1l

Satomi watched her pack in silence. Despite the plethora of possessions littering her room, Sae didn't seem to be taking much- spare clothes were all that she folded into her knapsack. Every once in a while she'd fail to hide a sniffle under her sleeve, but she seemed determined not to break down. Nevertheless, the girl's apparent conviction to avoid letting anyone see her cry granted Satomi only a view of her back, her obi tied neatly into a butterfly knot.

In all honesty, she didn't know why Sae was crying. She had clearly made the decision herself, and if it saddened her so much, she could simply change her mind and stay home.

It was while she was having this thought that the thirst began.

It always started with a dry throat. Then the pain would come- a searing pain that coursed through her whole body, starting from her stomach. Sometimes it came on gradually, other times it hit her like a punch in the face. This time it was the latter.

Satomi doubled over, clutching her stomach, her teeth grinding so hard together she could feel it in every part of her skull. "\_Dammit! Why now?!\_" she thought, trying to keep her breathing in check and failing, eventually gasping laboriously through her teeth. It had been such a long time since her last episode- she almost forgot what it felt like. Somehow, that made it worse.

"What's wrong?!" Sae was at her side. Satomi tried to focus on something- anything- to keep herself in control. Her image of choice ended up being the butterfly patterns on Sae's yukata, her eyes tracing the intricate patterns of their wings. She concentrated on the colorful smatterings of purple and red- was that her blood?- until the edges no longer blurred.

"I'm fine." Satomi huffed, finally able to form sentences. She regained control of her breathing and began to count, rocking gently to and fro with each number she silently listed. "It will go away soon . . . I train to deal with these all the time."

Sae remained unconvinced. "Are you sure? Do you need something?"

"No, I'm . . . fine." As soon as the word left her mouth it was gone, as quickly as it came. Though it didn't pass as fast as usual, it was faster than she could have hoped for, given the long period of time between this and her last episode.

"What happened?" Sae asked, as Satomi straightened to catch her breath.

"You're lucky you don't have to deal with it . . ." Satomi said,

wiping away a trace of saliva from the corner of her mouth. "It's a special gift for being a western demon."

Sae's eyebrows pulled down in confusion. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean." she said. "As far as I'm aware, whether we live in the east or west doesn't contribute to whether we have . . . those occurrences."

Satomi shook her head. "No, I'm talking about \_the\_ West." she said. It looked like she was going to reveal it- she supposed she was in the best environment to do so, in any case. "I was born in England. My father was from here- Japan. My mother was a western demon. In the West . . . demons don't have the luxury of being able to walk around comfortably in the daylight. Or live without suffering from debilitating thirst for blood every once in a while."

Eyes wide, Sae's gaze drifted from Satomi's face to her hair. "Oh my . . . I never knew . . . I mean I must admit I'm not terribly versed in the world's affairs outside my own . . but I never knew about this phenomenon at all! So that's why your hair . . . and then your last name isn't from any clan . . . " Her thoughts seemed to travel a mile a minute, unable to take in so much information at once.

"Yeah." Satomi said, pulling down the rest of the black cloth from her head as if to fully prove her heritage. "My parents talked pretty fondly of this country. After my mother passed away I figured I'd come experience it myself. My presence wasn't very welcome here." She smiled wryly. "Sorry . . I guess I'm not the most reliable bodyguard after all."

"Oh no no no!" Sae waved her hands in front of her in denial. Her smile was small, but genuine, and her previous tears were still fresh in her eyes. "I'm happy that Satomi is coming with me. That way I don't have to be alone."

Satomi returned her smile.

"\_That's right.\_" she thought. "\_Now I don't have to be alone either.\_"

### 3. Chapter 3: Newcomers

Author's Note:

Reviews and criticisms welcome and appreciated!

This chapter is from Kyoko's POV.

#### Chapter 3: Newcomers

Clothes piled to the floor and doors squeaked open and close in the usual hustle and bustle of a typical morning in the Shinsengumi. The light of dawn had barely begun to seep into the building's windows when the 1st Division awoke, their excited babblings and idle chatter bound to stir any late sleeper. Feet stomped to and fro, and futons were rolled up and thrown recklessly into the closet, the promise of a hearty breakfast driving the soldiers to speed through their morning routine.

But Kyoko Tsugunaga remained curled underneath the warm blankets, her eyes shut tightly. Though she was wide awake, she willed her breathing to slow, her muscles to stay motionless, just as she did every morning. Footsteps rushed past her on either side, heedless of the slumbering person still tucked under the covers- her fellow soldiers had long ago stopped attempting to wake her up at the start of each day. This was okay with her. It made her secret easier to keep.

Soon there were only two soldiers left in the room, the sound of rustling clothes being the only indication of their presence. After a moment of groggy silence, one of them spoke.

"Looks like Kyo's gonna sleep in again . . . eventually that guy's gonna get in trouble with the Captain . . ."

The other emitted a derisive snicker in response. "I'll feel sorry for him when he does . . . I really wouldn't wanna be the one to piss off Captain Okita . . ."

Kyoko squeezed her eyes closed even tighter, red spots dancing behind her eyelids. "Hurry up and leave, you idiots!" she silently cursed. The sooner they left, the sooner she could get dressed.

But the men continued talking. "Did you see the Vice-Commander's new page?"

"Yeah, kid's got his own room. The hell's up with that?"

"Bullshit if you ask me. Probably some rich guy's kid."

Kyoko fidgeted impatiently, her teeth grinding behind her lips. "Just leave already!" she thought. At this rate she'd be late for breakfast and all of the good stuff would be gone.

But the conversation concerning Hijikata's new page continued, and it took all of her self-control not to stand up and scream. Feigning sleep every morning was not just a hobby for Kyoko- it was a necessity. Changing clothes in front of the other soldiers was simply not an option for her. She had an image to maintain, an identity to protect- she had to be "Kyo" of the Shinsengumi.

Nobody could know that she was actually a girl.

The moment of inner turmoil passed, and Kyoko forced herself to relax her muscles, to maintain a steady breathing rhythm. Getting worked up now would only give her away. It only took a couple of soldiers to know before it would spread throughout the entire division- and then getting kicked out of the Shinsengumi was the easiest punishment she could possibly have. She didn't want to consider the other possibilities. She would bide her time.

Time passed slowly, and her eyes finally drifted open. The room was empty- everyone had finally left, leaving her in silence. Kyoko dragged herself from under the covers, savoring a long stretch. As she reached under her pillow to grab a fresh set of bandages, she blinked away the bright sunlight- too bright. Something was off.

Kyoko looked around the room- the shadows had stretched to touch the



opposite wall, and not a sound could be heard from the kitchen or adjoining hallways. A shiver crept up her spine as the realization hit her.

". . . . \_shit!\_ I'm late!" She scrambled to her feet and threw on her clothes, wrapping the bandages around her body to flatten her chest with the speed born of frequent repetition. Tying her long auburn hair into a high ponytail, she burst out the door, leaving her crumpled futon on the ground.

"\_Shit shit shit shit!\_" she cried as she hurtled through the deserted kitchen, briefly stumbling over her own feet. Somehow her last attempt to relax had caused her to fall asleep again- now she had overslept completely, and she had no idea how long her short snooze had eaten into the morning's training session.

Kyoko shoved a peach- one of the few leftovers from breakfast- into her mouth and sped out of the kitchen, skidding around the corner and-

"Gah?!"

-colliding directly into Commander Isami Kondo's chest. The round fruit flew from her mouth and landed an impressive eight feet away, bouncing a few times before rolling to a stop.

"Ah. Tsugunaga of the 1st Division." Vice-Commander Keisuke Sannan slithered out from behind a still bewildered Kondo, nudging his glasses higher onto his nose with one finger. Unlike his colleague, he didn't look particularly surprised.

"Sorry!" Kyoko blurted out and lowered her head, though it wasn't in shame- she was trying desperately to hide her inopportune laughter. Bumping into the commanders, the flying peach, the fact that her previous frantic cursing had probably been heard- it should have been mortifying but somehow she was close to howling.

Sannan didn't seem to notice. "Take care to arrive on time for practice." he said, his kind voice contradicting the coldness in his eyes. Kyoko was no longer laughing- anyone in contact with the second Vice-Commander had noted he was gentle, though she found that to be only a thin mask when he was scolding others. If she had to be honest, she found him positively creepy.

"I will!" she promised, turning to run off in the direction of the courtyard.

Kondo's voice boomed jubilantly from behind her. "Good luck today, Tsugunaga!"

Kyoko waved behind her without slowing, preparing herself as she turned the corner. She would need all the luck she could get- and not for training. She prepared herself for the worst.

She slowed her pace as she reached the courtyard. The sounds of wooden swords knocking against one another could be heard before she peeked her head around the open door. Her fellow warriors were knee-deep in training- each had been paired with another, and all were practicing their most deadly strike with the safety of the\_ bokken\_.

Kyoko scanned the training grounds, her eyes wandering over the perimeter of the courtyard until she found him- Captain Okita was observing his unit from the sidelines, his arms crossed, his expression the epitome of indifference. A few feet away from him lay the supply of wooden swords.

Her eyes bounced from Okita to the swords, and then back again. It was a risk, but there was a good possibility that she could nab a weapon and throw herself into training without the captain noticing- after all, it looked as though he was barely paying attention as it was.

After a few moments of contemplation, Kyoko made a careful dash to the pile of swords, her eyes never leaving Okita. Her hand closed around the first hilt she could find and she turned to rush over to the nearest available sparring partner, already silently celebrating her success.

"Well, well, it's Kyo! What a \_surprise\_."

Kyoko froze in her tracks, the wooden sword dangling at her side. "\_Crap\_."

She turned to see Okita standing behind her, a mischievous grin planted on his face. The jerk had made a beeline to her like a bored cat who'd just spotted a string.

"Thought you'd want to make that an even ten hours." he said, his bright green eyes narrowing to gleeful slits.

Kyoko hid her blush. Had she really slept that long? "\_Still\_" she thought, examining his face. "\_He doesn't \_seem\_ angry . . .\_" He was certainly in the mood to humiliate her, but there was no malice in his tone. Maybe she could get away with this after all.

"I don't know how it happened!" Kyoko began, forcing her voice to sound casual. "I never-"

"You sure you don't want those extra 30 minutes?" Okita interrupted, and she stopped short in confusion, blinking. Was he actually being . . . nice? It didn't seem possible. Then his grin turned predatory, his eyes sparkling like a delighted lion who'd just caught its lunch. "After all, you don't get to have any more naps after you're \_dead\_."

"Wh-what?" Kyoko uttered, her previous excuse forgotten. She didn't understand- his comment could technically be taken as a friendly gesture, but his tone was positively \_malicious\_.

"I'm saying that I don't need any slackers in my division." His eyes were cold now, but the smile never left his face. "So I'm going to kill you."

Kyoko relaxed, letting out a breath. "Sure. In that case, I'll take that last nap." she said, rolling her eyes. It was one of Okita's idle death threats- the man was famous for them among the Shinsengumi. It was true that he viewed death lightly, so much so that it was frightening on occasion. But most of his promises to kill a soldier were never carried to fruition- at least, not if the crime

didn't suit the punishment.

Okita's smile disappeared, and with a flick of his thumb, he nudged his sword from its sheathe. The blade caught the sunlight, causing it to glimmer. "I'm serious."

Kyoko's voice caught in her throat, and she struggled to swallow. He did look serious. The captain's expression was so solemn that soldiers practicing nearby stopped their activities and turned to look, and Kyoko could see her own apprehension reflected in their eyes. Okita took a few steps forward, his expression unchanging, and a cold needle of fear wormed its way up and down her back. "He's really going to kill me!\_" she thought, panic giving way to anger.

"R-really?!" she blurted out incredulously, digging her heels firmly in place. She wouldn't run- she would stay here and argue until her death if she had to. "I overslept just one time, and you-"

"Hahahahaha!"

Kyoko's lecture was interrupted by howling laughter, and she watched helplessly as Okita doubled over in fits of childish cackles, holding his stomach in mock pain. She sighed. It was the same boyish laughter he had when they were kids. Nothing much has changed since then- only back then Okita knew her as "Kyoko", and not as the stranger she believed her to be now.

"Kyo, you have got to be the most gullible guy in the whole Shinsengumi!" Okita finally managed to gasp between laughter, wiping tears from his eyes. The soldiers all visibly relaxed, letting out a few relieved chuckles of their own.

Kyoko's cheeks grew hot with anger and embarrassment, and she turned her back to him, grabbing her wooden sword from the grass- she must have dropped it in her fright. "I am not . . . " she muttered stubbornly. She wasn't gullible. He was just a convincing actor- frighteningly convincing.

That was when an unfamiliar soldier- most likely from another division- ran out from inside of the building, stopping short just before stepping on the grass. He looked at the 1st Division's men with an expression so frantic that for a minute Kyoko believed they were being attacked.

"Hey everyone!" he called out, loud enough to echo across the courtyard. Everyone's attention turned from the still chuckling Okita to the building, all heads turning simultaneously to find the source of the commotion. The soldier pointed a finger toward the inside of the Shinsengumi residence, his arm shaking slightly in excitement. "GIRLS!"

All weapons dropped at once with a huge clatter, and soon every single 1st Division soldier was running into the building, the force of their stampede almost causing Kyoko to topple over in the rush.

"Hey . . . " Okita chided, tears of recent laughter causing his emerald eyes to gleam. Perhaps it was due to the success of his last

prank, but he sounded only mildly inconvenienced that the entirety of his unit was abandoning their practice session. "I didn't say you were dismissed . . ."

No one was listening. Seconds later he and Kyoko were standing alone in the courtyard, surrounded by fallen swords, the sudden absence of noise disconcerting. Okita sighed, crossing his arms.

"Guess it can't be helped. Might as well see what's going on." he said, before turning to grin confidentially to Kyoko. "Surprised you weren't running with them, Kyo."

"Ah, um . . ." she said, struggling for a proper response. She couldn't tell him she wasn't excited to see them- that might cause some rumors. But truthfully, looking at girls only made her yearn for their beautiful ornate yukatas more than anything else. "I guess the extra sleep is making me sluggish."

Okita shrugged, heading into the building at a leisurely pace. Kyoko followed behind him, soaking in his tall stature and wide shoulders. She savored the moments when the captain wasn't looking at her- then she could admire him fully without raising questions. She didn't know when it happened- likely, there was a period of time between his childhood and now that he had suddenly turned handsome. It would have never occurred to her back then that she would someday find that stubborn, bullied child . . . cute.

Kyoko snapped out of her daydreams as she stepped inside, both baffled and amused at what she saw. Every single soldier of the Shinsengumi was lined up at the front windows, craning their necks to see around shoulders and heads to get a look at the yard. She approached the crowd and stood on her toes, but it was no good- excluding Heisuke, who matched her height, she had always been dwarfed by the other soldiers.

"You're so puny." Okita jabbed loosely as he walked past her, and the crowd almost subconsciously parted for him. Kyoko followed close behind, using the captain's influence to squeeze her way to the front of the pack. Seconds later she had a prime view of the front of the Shinsengumi headquarters.

Standing there were three women, one of them speaking exuberantly to Kondo, who wore an expression between confusion and discomfort. The talker had an air of dignity, her head held high, yet she had a very kind demeanor as well. Behind her stood two others- one of them had her dark brown hair tied neatly in the back, her rust-colored eyes roaming over the Shinsengumi soldiers' faces with curiosity. But it was the other girl who grabbed Kyoko's attention first. This one had hair that shone a bright golden hue, the fluffy mass wrapped tightly in a bun.

One word hopped from one mouth to the other in whispers- "foreigner". Sometimes it was said in contempt, sometimes in admiration. The latter wasn't surprising- despite their position against western influence, most hadn't had female interaction in so long that Kyoko was sure they'd even consider females from another planet if given the option.

But that wasn't what was on her mind.

"The one in black looks . . . " Kyoko began, putting a finger to her lips in thought.

"Weird?" Okita guessed.

". . . tired." Kyoko finished. The girl did look exhausted. Though her skin was already fair, her face was even more pale than expected, and her eyelids drooped. She looked as though she would collapse at any moment. Perhaps this was the reason for their visit in the first place.

"So what do you think Kyo?!"

Kyoko was suddenly elbowed sharply in the ribs. Wincing, she turned to see Heisuke beside her, a playful smile adorning his childish features. After giving him a reproachful glare, she assessed the group of girls again, wracking her brain for an appropriate response. She searched for any kind of trait she could comment on, but just as expected, one point stood out- their yukatas were indeed sublime.

"So cute . . ." she murmured absent-mindedly, observing the colorful patterns paired with a vibrant obi. She missed being able to dress up- she adored being cute just as much as any member of her gender.

"So you are interested!" Heisuke responded, eyes wide. "I was beginning to wonder!"

Kyoko blinked. He had misinterpreted her absent-minded statement- she wanted those girls out of their clothes for a different reason. But admitting that would only make things complicated- perhaps it was better that he had the wrong idea.

". . . . So that's the current situation, as it stands."

A girl's voice drifted into the building- someone had opened a window, and now inklings of the conversation between the women and the commander could be heard. Kyoko leaned in closer to listen.

"Ah, um . . ." Kondo stuttered, a bead of nervous sweat sliding down his temple. "You see, I'd usually let the Vice-Commander have a say in this, but he's away at the moment . . ."

"That's right." Kyoko remembered. "Hijikata left on a trip to Osaka a couple of days ago." The Demon's absence created a strange sensation among the Shinsengumi- without him, the group was missing one of its driving forces, not to mention a strong voice in the role of decision-making. Even though Kondo's official rank was one of a commander, whatever Hijikata says usually goes. He was hard to ignore when he had a strong opinion on almost everything, especially when it was based on cold logic. Kondo, on the other hand, based his decisions on blind emotion- a trait that angered and baffled Hijikata in many occasions.

Kyoko scanned the area for Sannan, the other Vice-Commander, but she was unable to find the man anywhere in sight- Kondo was on his own.

"I see." said the girl, her lips forming a small pout. "Perhaps you

can make a decision in his stead. You see, the future of demons depends on us sorting this out. By accepting this arrangement, you would be greatly helping us out as well. We need your assistance."

That was the clincher.

"Well I can't call myself a samurai if I can't help a woman in need, can I?!" Kondo laughed heartily, patting the woman gently on the back. "Please make yourselves at home among the Shinsengumi!"

The soldiers erupted in giddy cheers and howls, and the commotion pushed Kyoko into Okita's side. Blushing, she risked a glance at his face, but the man was much too preoccupied with his own thoughts- he was grinning like a fool, his eyes never leaving the scene outside.

"Oh, Hijikata is going to\_ love\_ this!" he said, his expression elated.

"And by that you mean he's going to throw a fit." Kyoko added, straining to make her voice heard over the shouting. It didn't matter if Kondo made the decision- when The Demon finds out about it, heads would roll.

Okita just snickered in approval, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "This is going to be \_great\_!" He turned away and headed outside, continuing to laugh mischievously to himself. It was almost like he knew something everyone else didn't, something that made the situation a lot more hilarious than what it was. An inside joke that only he shared.

Sighing, Kyoko turned back to the window. The girl who had been speaking previously bowed to Kondo, and then to the girls by her side- it looked like their apparent representative was not going to be accompanying them. That left the brown-haired girl and the foreigner as the Shinsengumi's new housemates.

She couldn't imagine them staying long- once Hijikata caught wind of it, they'd most likely be sent away. But Kyoko couldn't help but be excited at the prospect of girls in the house. She hadn't had anyone to relate to in so long.

Perhaps she'd even be able to finally share her secret with someone.

#### 4. Chapter 4: First Day

Author's Note:

Reviews and criticisms welcome and appreciated!

This chapter is from Sae's POV.

Chapter 4: First Day

Sae had never seen so many men in her life.

Gathered at the entrance was a crowd of male soldiers, their excited

chattering and howls of approval growing louder with each step inside of the Shinsengumi residence. A plethora of men continuously flocked to the group, some tall, some short, a sea of swords and topknots. Though each had unique features, every man was staring at either Satomi or Sae, who had decided she would attempt to meet every single one of their gazes. Struggling to look accommodating, she glanced from one pair of eyes to the next, turning her lips into a polite smile. The noise level in the hall only increased tenfold as the soldiers shouted for attention, each one grappling to introduce themselves.

"Don't encourage them." Satomi's words were almost inaudible next to the crowd's insistent shouting. Sae's new bodyguard stared rigidly at Kondo's back, the color beginning to return to her face after receiving shelter from the sun. "Even a small invitation will make my job harder."

Sae opened her mouth to question her before snapping it shut again, turning her gaze to the floor. She didn't know how being cordial to their new housemates could possibly bring adverse effects, but the last thing she desired was to burden Satomi. The western demon's offer to protect her was the only reason she was able to take on Sen's request- without it she'd likely still be residing with her parents, one day blurring into the next.

"Return to your normal duties. That is an order." A spectacled man bustled into the room, ushering away the gawking soldiers with a sweep of his arm. His tone and gestures were of no doubt professional, but underneath his calm brewed a silent rage, and the room cleared out within moments, a few sulking men risking one more glance at the girls behind them. Once every soldier was out of sight, the man with the glasses turned his furious gaze to Kondo. "Commander Kondo, what is all this?"

The commander simply laughed, though it lacked the same affection as it had before- Sae briefly wondered if Kondo was regretting his decision in the face of his colleague's wrath. "Sorry for the sudden change in atmosphere, Sanan. These ladies needed some help, so they'll be staying with us for a little while." He coughed, forcing a tight smile. "Plus, we could always use a woman's touch around here!"

Sanan wasn't laughing. "Had it occurred to you to consult me before making this decision? Do you realize we've only made our living situation more complicated?" He fought to control his anger in front of the commander and succeeded, his unbridled emotion transforming into a defeated sigh. "Hijikata will not be pleased."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of Toshi." Kondo grinned victoriously before beginning to herd the girls into the other hallway. Sae and Satomi followed obediently, Sanan walking briskly to keep pace with Kondo's stride. "Besides" he added, though no one had prompted him to continue. His confident grin had disappeared, replaced by a somber expression. "This is for Yukimura as well. According to their escort, a demon from the opposing side is after her . . . these girls are acting as representatives for their kind, so to speak, so it's more of a preventative measure." He gave a reassuring smile to Sanan, whose complexion had blanched with every word he spoke. "I'm sure they'll have no reason to stick around after that's solved!"

Sae nodded vehemently in agreement, though the gesture was wasted- when Sanan turned back to examine them, the spectacles couldn't hide the fear in his eyes. "Demons?" he whispered, and Sae lowered her head, attempting her best impression of innocence. Satomi hadn't changed her lukewarm expression since entering the building, and merely stared back at him with tired eyes.

Sanan shook his head in denial, turning his attention back to Kondo. "Nonsense. Why would a \_demon\_ be after Yukimura?" he said, nudging his glasses back into position after shaking them askew. The question wasn't a challenge- the man had given up arguing the commander's decision long ago. "I knew housing the Yukimura girl would only cause future problems . . . I assume it won't be long before Hijikata decides she won't be worth her keep . . ."

Pursing her lips, Sae tried to keep her turbulent thoughts inside. Obviously, there had been some things Sen had neglected to tell the commander- she had a feeling the princess simply did whatever was necessary to convince the Shinsengumi to house them. But she found it hard to believe that Sanan couldn't connect the dots and deduce that there would be many reasons a demon would be after another demon.

"\_Is it possible that they don't know?\_" she thought, her eyes trained on the swishing hem of her violet yukata. "\_Could Yukimura be hiding the fact that she is a demon?\_" Obviously she couldn't fault her- after all, it seemed the men in command would only just barely let Satomi and herself stay under their roof with the knowledge of their species.

"We'll have to clear out a spare room for them." Sanan was saying, a reluctant sigh escaping with his words. He scanned the hallway for a moment before stopping at a door, yanking it open with one hand.

Kondo stopped short, his eyebrows raised. "I was planning to room them with Yukimura." he said, his tall form allowing him to look at Sanan over the girls' heads. Sae was beginning to feel like neither she nor Satomi was there, and were perhaps only looking at their situation from far, far away. "Given that they know of her . . . gender."

This only seemed to burden Sanan even more, and he visibly slumped a bit. "\_Nevertheless\_" he said, pulling the door open wider. "I insist they stay in the storage room for now. Best not to leave demons unattended with Yukimura."

Upon hearing the words "storage room", Sae imagined a cluttered room, a room barely able to accommodate a human, much less two. Yet when she stepped inside, she found an area void of many belongings, save for a series of wooden shelves and desks lined up on the opposite and adjacent walls. Stacks of papers peeked out from behind closed drawers, and piles of unused blankets poured from the closet. Though the room was small, there was plenty of space for two people to lounge and sleep in the center of the tatami floor.

"I'm sorry, this room isn't suited for a lady . . ." Kondo admitted upon entering, shame covering his cheeks with a splash of red. He smiled warmly. "We'll get it tidied up and fit to live in as soon as we're able!"



"It's quite all right! It's a fine room." Sae said, and she meant it- it was far better than what she expected. Previously, she had come to believe they'd likely be forced to live among strangers of the opposite sex. Now they had their own room- she couldn't have asked for more. "Thank you so much!"

"It's fine the way it is." Satomi added, observing their new living arrangements. She set the pack of materials- mostly consisting of Sae's possessions- that she'd been carrying on the floor. "We can sleep in here- that is all we need."

"I wouldn't expect to stay long, in any case." Sanan said, his words dampening the mood. He smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "But while you're here, you'll be expected to follow some rules. Wandering around the building is prohibited, unless attended by one of us or a captain. Also, only the commanders and the captains are aware that Yukimura is a girl- I expect this to remain the same by the time you leave. Under normal circumstances, you two would be expected to don the same disguise in order to live here . . ."

Sae's heart froze in her chest. She didn't want to be a boy- no matter what, she couldn't be a boy.

". . . But it is far too late for that. Most soldiers have seen the two of you enter already." Sanan finished bitterly, and Sae sighed in relief. He turned to Kondo. "We'll require someone to keep watch at all times. I'll retrieve Saito."

With that, the spectacled man left the room, his padded footsteps echoing down the hall. The commander's lips turned up into a sincere grin, and the mood lifted along with it. "Please make yourselves at home." he said. "If you need anything, let one of us know."

"We will! Thank you very much for your hospitality!" Sae bowed deeply, her hands shaking slightly with gratitude. For the first time in her life, she was in a new place, with new people, far away from home- she was thankful, excited and terrified at the same time.

Pleased, Kondo nodded in a curt bow before gently sliding the door shut behind him, leaving Sae and Satomi alone.

"Well!" Sae exclaimed after a second of silence. There had been something nagging at her since their arrival at the Shinsengumi residence- Satomi's health. She made her way over to the half-open closet, pulling blankets from the top shelf and almost causing the entire stack to tumble down with it. "If you're tired, you should sleep! I'm positive no one will mind. After all, we've both had a long journey-"

"I'm fine. It's better now that I'm out of the sun." Satomi said, though she sounded distant- Sae turned to find her companion examining the surroundings of their new bedroom, seemingly lost in her own world. Occasionally she would run a small hand over the paper walls, or peek behind a shelf or desk. Just as Sae considered asking what she was searching for, Satomi squeezed her thin fingers behind a shelf, giving it a short tug. The piece of furniture lurched aside, and Satomi leaned in closer to peer into the shadows behind it. "Ah hah."

"What are you doing?!" Sae abandoned the blankets, walking over to Satomi's side. She watched pensively as the girl reached an arm behind the shelf and yanked open a sliding screen door hidden behind it, the sunlight washing over the dusty storage room. Her heart hammered in her chest- they shouldn't be doing this. They weren't supposed to do this.

"Securing an escape route." Satomi said simply, pulling the door open until the crack was a few inches wide. The opening provided a direct view of a courtyard, tall trees casting shade over the fenced-in land. A casual conversation between men could be heard faintly from the distance. "I was wondering if our room faced the outside. If that was the case, there was a possibility there was a sliding door somewhere in here."

"Escape?!" Sae blurted out, baffled. After the kind treatment they had just received from the commander, the last thought in her mind was running away. "Why would we ever dream of escaping?"

"You never know." Satomi said calmly, patting dust from her yukata. She scooted the shelf to the left with her shoulder, until the edge of the wooden structure would only just barely obscure the opening to the outside. Once the screen door would close, their "escape route" would be invisible, yet easily accessible. "It's good to know if we can flee on short notice. I have to be able to protect you from anything."

Sae didn't say another word. She didn't know what could possibly happen among the Shinsengumi headquarters that would prompt them to escape, but Satomi was doing exactly as she promised- she was being a bodyguard.

Kneeling next to Satomi, Sae peeked outside, her eyes roaming over the trees and blue sky. Her gaze drifted to the source of the male chatter she had heard before, eventually discovering two men having a discussion in the corner of the courtyard, their backs facing them. Off to the side, a younger male was practicing sword techniques by himself, a wooden sword in hand. Her fingers closing around the sliding door, she dared to tug it open another inch- Satomi didn't protest, but instead leaned in closer.

"Okita, weren't you having a training session with your men?" said a man clothed almost entirely in black, his hand resting idly on his sword. Sae squinted in disbelief- for some reason, the man's katana was strapped on the left instead of the right.

The brown-haired man named Okita shrugged helplessly. "After the commotion caused by the girls, I couldn't keep one of them focused." he admitted. He turned to the young practicing man with a snide grin. "Except for Kyo here. He's making up for lost time."

Kyo frowned without stopping, slashing downward with each step forward and back. "He just hates me." he huffed, his long auburn ponytail swishing to and fro with each swing. His forlorn expression implied that this practice session wasn't a voluntary one. Okita's grin only grew wider.

An even younger man- perhaps even a boy- entered the courtyard, his black hair tied up with red string. Shifting his eyes nervously back

and forth, he timidly approached the conversing men. "Good morning, Okita! Good morning, Saito!" he chirped politely.

Okita turned to the boy, his smile softening. "Good morning, Chizu-Yukimura."

Sae stifled a gasp, though she didn't know why- none of them were likely to hear her from this distance. Despite this, her next words were spoken in a whisper. "\_That's \_Yukimura?!" The small girl didn't \_look \_like the sole survivor of a powerful demon clan- in fact she looked almost puny, her big brown eyes accentuating her childish features.

Kyo let his sword dangle to his side, examining the girl curiously. Saito shot Okita a dangerous glare.

"Relax! We're just having a little chat with the \_page\_." Okita assured him, holding up his palms in defense. He turned to Yukimura again. "Something on your mind?"

"What?! H-how did you guess . . .?" Yukimura said, flustered. Her gestures were so feminine- even if Sae hadn't known previously that she was a girl, her actions and manner of speech were bound to give it away.

"We didn't have to. You just told us." Saito said, his tone apathetic. "At any rate, if you have something to say, then out with it."

Flinching under his harsh words, the girl tentatively continued. "Well . . . I was hoping I could go outside soon."

Saito's eyes darted quickly to Kyo again, who had nonchalantly continued his practice. The soldier stared ahead, his gaze unyielding, but there was no way to know if he still continued to listen to the conversation.

"That's not possible." Saito continued anyway, lowering his voice slightly. "We don't have enough men to spare to keep an eye on you."

Sae inched closer to the gap in the wall, straining to listen. It seemed they kept Yukimura under lock and key as well- though in this case, considering Kazama's imminent arrival, it was probably safer this way.

"Oh . . ." Yukimura deflated, her shoulders slouching in disappointment. "Isn't there anything you can do? It's not like I want to go very far. Just a walk around the city near your headquarters would be enough . . ."

Saito's expression didn't change, but Okita's did- his green eyes turned to the sky in thought. "Hmm. Well, I suppose we might be able to let you tag along when we go on our rounds." he conceded, and Yukimura's face lit up with anticipation. "\_But \_ . . . this isn't just a stroll. If you're out with us, your life is in danger. If we make mistakes, our men die. If you don't want to get cut open by some angry ronin with too much drink and too little coin, you need to be ready to put up a fight."

Sae found it hard to imagine the descendant of the Yukimura clan having any trouble fighting off humans, unless she was outnumbered. Kazama, on the other hand, would be a different story- then it was debatable whether the Shinsengumi had the strength to protect her from him.

"Well, I know a little self-defense . . ." Yukimura said slowly, avoiding the men's eyes.

"In that case, allow me to test you." Saito said, and Yukimura's head jerked up in surprise. "Let me see if that blade of yours is merely for show."

"What?" she said, visibly frightened. Her hand wandered to the hilt of the small sword at her side. "Yes, I've learned how to use my sword but I . . . I . . ."

"Now Saito, let's start off with someone of the same skill level . . ." Okita chided, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. "Kyo! Get over here."

Kyo halted mid-swing, dropping his wooden sword and trotting over to the others. His features were soft, round- despite his gender, one could almost call him pretty.

"Have a little sparring match with the page here." Okita ordered, jerking a lazy thumb in Yukimura's direction. "Even though it might be tempting, don't kill anyone, okay?"

Saito's eyebrows lowered in disapproval, the corner of his lips turning down in a snarl. "Okita . . ."

"I won't!" Kyo promised, drawing the sword at his side with a flourish. Saito remained unconvinced, a bead of nervous sweat formed on his temple. Kyo gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry! I'll go easy on him!"

Yukimura's sword remained in its sheathe. "Are you sure about this?" she almost whimpered. "Swords are meant to kill people. If I cut him, he might get injured or die!"

Okita chuckled. "Doing this will give us an idea if you can go on patrol with us. So just try?" he said, his tone gentle. It was similar to talking to a child, but it seemed to work- Yukimura noticeably relaxed, slowly sliding her blade from its sheathe. Okita turned to Kyo, and not a hint of doubt could be found in his next words. "Besides, Kyo'll be fine."

Though he didn't acknowledge his words, Kyo's cheeks reddened, and he steadied his katana in front of him, slipping into a fighting stance. "You first." he said to Yukimura, wearing a friendly smile.

"O-okay." she stammered. After a moment's hesitation, she lurched forward, swinging her sword in a downward arc. Her attack was blocked effortlessly, as well as the one after that, and the one following it. Kyo hardly looked like he was trying- he simply blocked or dodged swing after swing, leaving Yukimura to scurry after him, slashing blindly.

"Don't hold back!" he encouraged her, shielding himself from another attack. The clanking sounds of metal on metal echoed through the courtyard. Okita looked on this display with amusement- Saito had an expression closer to concern.

"I'm . . . not!" Yukimura gasped, already fighting for air. After several more swings, Kyo finally switched to offense, lightly bringing down his weapon upon Yukimura's own. Though his attack appeared to be a lazy one, Yukimura was thrown off her feet, landing roughly on her back. Her sword was sent flying across the courtyard, landing in the grass a few feet away.

"Oops! Are you okay?" Kyo exclaimed, though he looked somewhat more amused than worried. He moved to help the girl up, but Saito was already at her side.

Okita's childish laughter resonated throughout the courtyard. "Kyo, you really are trying to kill her . . ."

"But I barely-" Kyo began to protest, before stopping short. Okita was still laughing- he was simply teasing him.

"That's enough for me to evaluate." Saito said, gently helping Yukimura to her feet. Her face was slightly pink- it wasn't clear whether this was from the overwhelming loss or from Saito's grip on her shoulders. "I think she's good enough to come along on patrols."

Yukimura almost fell over once more. "Really?"

"\_Really?\_" Sae repeated, searching Saito's face for any sign of sarcasm. Not only was it unbelievable that she lost the fight- female or not, demons would surely win a fight against a human- but clearly she wasn't skilled enough to face the dangers outside.

"After that performance?" Satomi added, her brow furrowing in doubt. Kyo looked just as clueless- he raised an eyebrow quizzically toward Okita, who had turned to fetch Yukimura's discarded weapon.

"Of course, even if we approve, you'll have to get permission from the guy who told you to stay here." Okita explained, bending down to take the sword from the ground before returning it to the girl's hands. "Nice blade. Looks old though."

It was at this moment that Sanan entered the courtyard, looking flustered and slightly exhausted. The men stiffened, cutting their conversation short.

"Saito, there you are." Sanan said, approaching his target without a sideward glance to the others. "You're a hard man to find."

"I have been residing here for the past half hour or so." Saito said, though his tone wasn't accusatory. He was simply stating a fact. "What do you need of me?"

"I have a request for you. Please come with me, if you're able." Sanan smiled, turning on his heels before waiting to see if the man would follow.

"Understood." Saito began to follow him, before stopping to speak to

Yukimura once more. "I'm sorry, Yukimura. It looks like you'll have to wait until Hijikata gets back from Osaka."

"It's okay! You've all helped out a lot." she assured him, her eyes sparkling with joy. She was clearly looking forward to going outside. Sae wondered just how long she'd been kept inside her room- how long \_they'd\_ be kept in their room.

The sound of the door to the storage room sliding open was almost deafening.

"I found some sweets in the cupboard-"

Kondo shuffled excitedly into the room, tray in hand. Sae's heart dropped to her stomach like an anvil- she frantically spun around to close the "escape route" door, only to find that it was already closed, the entrance obscured by the shelf. Satomi had moved frighteningly fast, and had jumped into a traditional kneeling position on the floor, her expression composed.

The commander stopped in his tracks, his eyes wide, and for a second Sae feared that he somehow \_knew\_ what they were up to despite Satomi's blinding speed. Then his face transformed into the color of Sae's obi- a bright, vivid red.

"Ah! I've just entered a woman's room without announcing myself!" he practically shouted, and leapt back over the threshold, as if this would reverse his actions. Two cups of tea jangled on the tray he was holding.

"It's fine!" Sae said, her voice cracking. The burst of adrenaline she'd received when he entered was still in her system- her entire body trembled. "We weren't doing anything!"

Satomi shot her a fixed glare- too obvious.

Kondo didn't seem to notice her exaggerated denial. "Ah . . ." he smiled, relieved, and stepped into the room once more. He bent down to gently set the tray on the floor in front of them. On top of it sat a variety of colorful candies, as well as two hot cups of green tea. "I found these, and thought you girls might like them."

All previous matters were forgotten in an instant. Before she knew it, Sae was sitting with a pink candy in the palm of her hand, savoring its texture before she would inevitably devour it. "Oh, this is just \_wonderful\_! I simply adore sweets!" she cooed, popping the sweet substance in her mouth. The taste was almost overwhelming- it was rare when she had the opportunity to have candy back home, and she hadn't grown accustomed to the sudden sugar rush.

Satomi was smiling too- she had reached for the tea first, and was sipping it slowly, her expression the picture of contentment. She looked happier than she did in a long time- it's possible that Sae had never seen her this content in the short time they'd known each other. "Thank you very much!" she said, before lifting the cup to her lips again.

Kondo looked delighted. He seemed to get an unwarranted amount of satisfaction from providing for them- Sae doubted that he was childless by this point, but if he was, she was sure he'd make a

splendid father.

"I apologize for the lacklustre hospitality here. I know you heard some scary things about Tosh- Hijikata, our Vice-Commander." he said, looking slightly ashamed. He kneeled down beside them, and Sae politely scooted closer to Satomi to make room. "I wanted you to know that I'll talk to him when he gets back. Perhaps it will lighten the shock. He isn't a bad person. He just . . . looks out for the Shinsengumi."

"It's understandable." Satomi said, setting her cup of tea on the tray. Sae assumed it wouldn't stay there long. "I admit, it would be a pretty strange situation to come back to. I wouldn't blame him if he got upset."

"Thank you for talking to him." Sae added, her voice muffled over the candy. Embarrassment forced her to swallow it. "But please don't get into trouble because of us. We don't want to be a burden." She was sure she'd rather leave than be a bother to the Shinsengumi at this point.

Kondo laughed, the sound comforting and warm. "I'm sure I won't get into trouble- being the commander should have given me some persuasive abilities by now, I hope!"

Sae hid her blush behind the sleeve of her yukata. That's right- he's the commander of the entire Shinsengumi. Somehow, the talk of Hijikata was so foreboding that she had come to believe the man had acquired even more power than Kondo.

"I know you girls are trying to help us prevent a catastrophe and I appreciate it." he said, smiling cheerfully. "But the others will need time. Please be patient."

"It's no problem. We'll try our best to help!" Sae said earnestly. Now she wanted to help more than ever- they had received such a warm welcome from Kondo, that she was willing to do anything to avoid letting him down.

"Well, I should get back to work." he said, slapping his knees before rising. "You girls rest from your journey." He headed toward the doorway, leaving the tray.

Sae and Satomi bowed, wishing him a farewell. Then the door slid shut behind him, leaving the two of them alone, neither of them knowing when their next visit would be.

## 5. Chapter 5: Bad Impressions

Author's Note:

Reviews and criticisms are appreciated!

This chapter is from Satomi's POV.

### Chapter 5: Bad Impressions

The muffled noises of conversation jolted her from slumber, her eyelids snapping open. She sat up, her heart racing, and for a moment

she didn't know where she was- her eyes wandered over the shelves, the blankets, the tatami floors, but not one of them lent a clue of her surroundings. Then she saw Sae, sprawled out on her stomach under the blankets, her long brown hair fanned out on the floor below her, and it all came flooding back.

It seemed Satomi wasn't able to resist the temptation of sleep after all. She had intended to vigilantly stay awake through Sae's waking periods, despite it being the opposite of her own- after all, a nocturnal bodyguard wouldn't provide as much use as one who could watch over their client's daily events. However, as soon as her noble friend laid out the futon, Satomi found herself curled up under the covers, the desire for sleep overwhelming. It looked as though Sae eventually succumbed to this as well, and Satomi watched the brunette's rhythmic breathing for a while. The sun's low position in the sky indicated that it was only late afternoon, but both of them had had a long journey to Kyoto- no one could blame them for the impulsive nap.

The muted conversation outside grew louder. It wasn't coming from the hallway- Saito, their apparent watchdog for the day, was so utterly quiet that Satomi sometimes wondered if he was even at his post at all. The discussion that had awoken her was instead located in the courtyard, just outside of their room.

Satomi crawled out of the tangled blankets, creeping over to the hidden opening in the wall. She reached a pale arm behind the shelf and slid it open just a crack, the movement so slow that any resulting noise was imperceptible. A burst of cold winter air rushed inside, chilling her face and raising goosebumps on her skin. She turned to glance at Sae, gritting her teeth- fortunately the girl was still dozing, wrapped safely in covers.

"What a meeting . . ." A gruff voice slid through the gap in the wall. Satomi pressed her ear to the wooden borders of the door, braving the frigid wind that would inevitably bite at it. She felt not an ounce of guilt- this same conversation had woken her up, after all. She might as well discover what the topic was. The same man continued speaking. "What was he thinking?"

"C'mon, Shinpachi." Another voice chimed in, smooth as silk. "I thought you out of all people would enjoy the thought of more girls around."

Satomi gulped. The subject of the conversation was them. Kondo must have broken the news to some of the men higher up- even now, the commander was battling for their side. Though judging by the man's- Shinpachi's- critical tone, she guessed it hadn't gone over so well.

"Sano, even I have standards. Demons?" Shinpachi scoffed. Though his attitude was clearly dismissive, Satomi could detect a bit of fear in the pitch of his voice. "I dunno where Kondo's head is at. Put a helpless girl in front of him and all proper judgement goes out the wind-"

"Hey!" another voice barked. Satomi recognized this one- it was Okita, one of the men she had so diligently spied on before. She could hear some aggression in his words, something she hadn't expected from the childish soldier she had witnessed earlier. "If



Kondo decided it, then it's fine. There's a reason he's in charge, you know."

"Don't get too worked up over Shinpachi. He gets carried away." Sano laughed. His tone was playful, but soon hardened. "I don't quite agree with this decision either. I'm not too comfortable taking such a huge risk based only on a \_chance\_ that something could happen. But it's not the girls' fault."

"Whatever." Shinpachi spat. "We don't need 'em. I say if that bastard wants to come and try to take Yukimura, we can just kill him ourselves!"

"At least that's something we can agree on." Okita conceded, the smile returning to his voice.

"You both are just hungry." Sano teased. "Looks like it's dinner time."

The banter continued, but the words floated away with the wind as the men went inside. Satomi snapped the concealed door shut, rubbing the warmth back into her ear. She supposed it could be worse- at least none of them had expressed the desire to kill them in their sleep. Okita had defended Kondo's decision, and the man named Sano had admitted that they weren't to blame even if it were a bad one. But she had heard none of them say that they were useful, or that they were grateful to have them there. She wondered briefly if Kondo would remain their only ally after all.

Something shifted outside the storage room, and Satomi scurried back to her futon, reclining into a sleeping position. With the escape route closed she had nothing to hide, but someone coming in only to see her doing nothing would perhaps evoke more suspicion than necessary.

The door to the hallway slid open, and Satomi forced herself to lift her eyelids slowly, as if awaking from a deep slumber.

"I apologize. Have I interrupted something?" Standing in the doorway was Saito, his apathetic expression contradicting his apology.

"You know, there's a handy invention in the West called 'knocking' . . ." Satomi mumbled, lifting herself up and rubbing her eyes. Sae stirred beside her, stretching her arms high above her head.

A crease appeared in Saito's forehead. "I must apologize again. I don't see how this fact relates to the current situation." he admitted. "But I find it intriguing, nonetheless. Perhaps you can tell me about 'knocking' on the way to dinner."

Satomi stifled a gasp. They were being invited to dinner. Presumably with other people. She didn't know how to feel about this- she had predicted that they wouldn't be involved in group gatherings for quite some time. This had given her the false perception that she had more time to mentally prepare herself for extended interaction. Now it was being dropped on her like a lead weight- she fought the urge to hide herself underneath the blankets.

"Is it a dance?" Sae was sitting up now, strands of tangled hair sticking to her cheeks. Despite her status, the girl didn't sleep

gracefully. Satomi blinked- it took her a few seconds to realize she was still talking about "knocking". "It sounds like a dance."

". . . No." Satomi said. Sae's face fell. She had a feeling the girl had really looked forward to seeing Satomi- and in turn, Saito- perform this fabled dance.

"Please take your time." Saito said, and though his tone was flat as always, Satomi could sense a bit of impatience. "Though I must warn you, dinner has likely already commenced."

Sae's face paled as the realization finally hit her. "D-dinner?" she stammered, frantically combing a few fingers through her matted hair. She looked just as nervous as Satomi felt, and for a moment she felt like refusing the offer- both for Sae and for her own sake.

But she couldn't. They couldn't waste this opportunity. There was no way to know how much freedom they'd be allowed in the upcoming days- or even in the upcoming weeks. Satomi stood up, patting down her dark yukata. She'd have to bear it.

"All right, I think I'm ready." Sae announced, fumbling with a tie in her hair. No doubt she was referring to her physical attire- she certainly didn't appear mentally ready, nor was Satomi.

"Understood. Follow me." Saito said, leading them down the corridor. Satomi tried to regulate her breathing as she walked behind him, clasping her hands tightly. She tried to estimate just how much time she would need to endure this social event. Saito's uncanny silence did nothing to relieve the tension, and as they neared the common room and the rumble of mass conversations grew louder, she wondered if she would soon forget how to talk. "Knocking" was not discussed.

"\_There \_they are! Saito brought the girls!"

The group of men simultaneously looked up as Satomi and Sae entered the room, most eyes shining with curiosity. The table was not as populated as she had predicted- Including Saito, the night's dinner consisted of only five men. Considering the small number of people in attendance, as well as their freedom to interact with Sae and herself without repercussions, Satomi could make only one conclusion- These must be the captains of the Shinsengumi.

Among them Satomi recognized Okita, who had to turn to get a glimpse of them, his mouth wide with a mischievous grin. She gulped, scanning the small crowd- Kondo, their only friend, was nowhere to be found.

The one who had howled their presence earlier was a rather brawny man with a green bandana wrapped tightly around his forehead. Although Satomi had never seen him before, she had recognized his voice- he was none other than Shinpachi, the one she had overheard strongly disapproving of their arrival. She held back a scowl.

"\_Don't act like you're so pleased to see us.\_" Satomi thought, scrutinizing his jaunty smile. "\_I know how you truly feel.\_"

"Sit down! We don't bite." Okita coaxed, patting the thin pillows beside him. Despite his assurances, the glimmer in his eye said

otherwise- the man looked ready to happily devour them at any moment. Satomi braced herself and took the seat beside him, blocking him from Sae, whose lips were in a thin, nervous line. She doubted the girl would utter a word tonight- she likely had little interaction with men around her own age.

They had scarcely sat down when a younger man rose to his feet and rushed to sit across from them, squeezing himself in between Shimpachi and a red-haired captain. His light brown hair was tied high in a long ponytail, and he bared his teeth in an elated smile. "So is it true that demons don't have to eat or sleep? Or go to the bathroom? Do you still feel pain?" he asked, allowing himself little pause for breath. He turned to Satomi. "Can you speak English or . . . ?"

Satomi hesitated, trying to process the series of questions, before ultimately deciding to address the last one asked. "Ah . . . yes." she said, and suddenly every eye on the room was on her. She swallowed- she had answered truthfully, though now she saw the opportunity for it to backfire on her. She elaborated. "Though I've been here for a long time. I feel more Japanese than English."

The young man remained undeterred. "Whoa, amazing!" he exclaimed, leaning back in surprise. His other questions seemed to be quickly forgotten. "How do you say 'Heisuke' in English?!"

"Uh . . ." Satomi stammered. "'Heisuke' is still just 'Heisuke' in English . . ."

"Don't scare them off, Heisuke." The red-haired man laughed, leaning his arm on his upraised knee. Satomi recognized this voice too- this was Sano.

"Let him enjoy it while he can! They won't be around when Hijikata gets back!" Shimpachi bellowed, before snatching a piece of fish from an abandoned tray beside him. Satomi winced as the muscular man proudly consumed the morsel whole. Though her main source of nourishment came from blood, when she did consider food she mainly avoided seafood.

"Heeeey, Shin! That was mine!" Heisuke whined, darting back to his spot and pushing his claimed food farther away from his gluttonous companion.

"You left it alone over here! I thought you were giving it to me!" Shimpachi guffawed, his smile revealing his lie. He hovered over Heisuke's food, chopsticks in hand, and Heisuke shielded it protectively with his arms. "Besides, I need it more than you do!"

"No you don't!" Heisuke retorted, his voice cracking.

"It may be advantageous to eat now. It's doubtful the food will remain here much longer without being taken." It was a surprise Saito could even be heard over the bickering. He gripped his own chopsticks, lifting his left hand to swiftly nab a piece of trout. "This one's mine."

Satomi looked at her own plate- it was empty. Any potential food would have to be taken from the quantity in the middle of the table,

which was an assortment of fish and rice. She leaned back, her hands relaxed in her lap- it was times like these she was grateful she received no benefit from eating.

Eastern demons were a different story. Sae looked from one pile of food to the next, her eyebrows turned up in worry. Every time she would cautiously raise her chopsticks to take a bit of fish or rice, the food would be unintentionally swept up from underneath her by one of the captains. She would then retract her arm back in shock before inevitably trying again. Satomi watched this sad display for a few minutes before rolling up her left sleeve- it looked like she would not only have to protect her from physical harm, but from starvation as well.

With chopsticks in her left hand and a plate in her right, Satomi rapidly piled one piece of food after another onto Sae's tray, her hand merely a blur of movement. Seconds later Sae had a full course meal in front of her- likely more than she could even eat.

"There you go." Satomi said, handing a plate to her with a curt nod.

Sae's eyes shone with gratitude. "Oh, thank you so much!" she said, staring ravenously at the smelly fish.

Heisuke and Shinpachi's argument halted mid-sentence. "Whoa, amazing!" Heisuke said, his bright eyes wide with admiration. This quickly turned to fear, as another thought seemed to cross his mind. "That's fast . . ."

Shinpachi's expression mimicked Heisuke's. She wasn't sure why- it wasn't like she was going to start stabbing them with chopsticks. Thankfully, the other men seemed either amused or uninterested with this latest action.

"I've made some more tea!" Satomi stiffened as Yukimura entered the room, tray in hand. In the corner of her eye she saw Sae straighten- they hadn't expected to see her.

The girl stared intently at the tray as she walked, concentrating on keeping the cups of tea level, but stopped short when she looked up and saw Sae and Satomi. Her previous effort was in vain- Satomi saw some tea slosh out of the cups due to the sudden stop.

"Just set it on the table, Chizuru." Okita said, taking note of her shock and choosing to ignore it.

"Souji!" Sano snapped, glaring at the man sitting across from him.

Okita merely shrugged, chewing idly on the tail of a fish. "What? We can call her 'Chizuru' if we want. Kondo told us they already know her secret."

Sano visibly relaxed, unclenching a fist.

"I would not have invited them to dine in her presence if I thought otherwise." Saito confirmed, and Satomi thought he almost seemed slightly offended.

Chizuru sat across from them, placing herself between Shinpachi and Sano, her dark brown eyes never leaving their faces. Her interest in them seemed to stem mostly from curiosity now rather than from shock.

"Oh!" Sae exclaimed, as if just remembering something important, before quickly bending into a low bow. "I'm very honored to meet a member of the Yukimura clan! Why, I scarcely believed it would ever happen! I'm sure you can understand how rare of an occurrence it must be . . ."

The men erupted into laughter, drowning out Sae's last words. Chizuru blinked, returning Sae's bow with a short one of her own. "Um . . . nice to meet you too?"

"We've got some odd ones . . ." Okita chuckled, bringing a cup of sake to his lips.

Shinpachi slapped the table. "'Yukimura clan' . . . that's great!"

Satomi glanced from one laughing face to the other, searching for the joke. Unable to find one, she looked at Sae instead, whose cheeks were flushed with confusion and embarrassment.

"\_Is it possible that even \_Chizuru\_ doesn't know she's a demon?\_" Satomi thought, gazing at Chizuru. Even if she were hiding it from the captains, she didn't strike Satomi as a good actress. "\_Even if she is, it's not like we can just tell her now . . . Dammit, just what kind of situation did Sen drop us in?\_"

"Hey, how much honor do you have for the Toudou clan?" Heisuke said, leaning across the table to get closer to Sae.

"A fair amount, I guess?" Sae answered, puzzled. She placed a hand on her cheek to cool it. "I'm ashamed to admit I know little of your family . . ."

Heisuke brightened. "That only means we should get to know each other more!" he exclaimed proudly, hands on his hips.

Satomi smiled. "You're cute, but I see what you're doing." she said, cocking an eyebrow. It was obvious by now that Sae wasn't understanding his intentions, as lighthearted as they were- if she unintentionally dug herself in too deep, it would be difficult for Satomi to pull her out. "Cut it out, will you?"

"Ah . . . she's scary . . ." Heisuke muttered, slinking back to his seat at the table. Satomi hadn't intended to be frightening, though she supposed it would work to her advantage in this instance. Sae simply looked from Satomi to Heisuke, completely baffled.

Sano laughed affectionately. "What a novice flirt."

"Geez, Heisuke, for one who claims he doesn't go to Shimabara for girls, you turn to mush as soon as they're around!" Shinpachi chided, slapping the boy on the back.

"Shut up, I was just being friendly!" Heisuke retorted, the color of his cheeks now matching Sae's.

The night continued in this manner, and soon the room was filled with laughter, some polite, some genuine. Satomi couldn't resist joining in as well, making sure she didn't laugh too hard- opening her mouth too wide would reveal her fangs, a mildly embarrassing physical attribute of western demons. Though as the night wore on, she wondered if it even mattered- the fact that they were demons no longer seemed to be an issue for the men, as they distracted themselves with playful banter and sake.

Just as the night's merriment began to reach its peak, a middle-aged man entered the common room, his expression grim. All laughter came to an abrupt stop.

"Gentlemen, do you have a moment?" he asked.

Saito was the first to respond. "What happened, Inoue?"

Inoue waited for a moment, as if wondering how to put it into words. "Sanan has been gravely injured in battle."

Satomi couldn't breathe. They had just seen Sanan this morning. Now he was "gravely injured"- in her experience, these words weren't used for a minor injury. It was likely that they had arrived just in time to see the Vice-Commander while he was still alive.

"What?!" Chizuru cried. Her voice was the only sound in the room- the men remained eerily quiet, their gaze trained on Inoue.

"He'd gone to investigate a report of several ronin harassing a cloth merchant. He managed to drive them off but . . ." Inoue explained. "He was wounded first."

Chizuru spoke the words everyone was thinking. "Is he going to be all right?"

"It wasn't his sword arm that was wounded." Inoue clarified. "He's almost certain to survive, but wielding a blade will be . . . difficult for him."

"Oh, thank goodness." Chizuru sighed in relief. Satomi could see Sae exhale as well, but the others remained somber. Satomi had a feeling she knew why- Sanan was a warrior, but after this event, it was uncertain if he could continue calling himself that.

"He'll need some time to recover. Now please, excuse me. I must speak with Kondou." Inoue said. He turned, exiting the room as quickly as he had entered.

No one spoke for a few moments, the room disturbingly quiet after all of the previous laughter. Chizuru looked hesitantly around the room- it seemed she had started to notice that the mood hadn't lifted at all since Inoue's entrance.

"This is bad . . ." Heisuke sighed behind clenched teeth.

"Why?" Chizuru asked, cocking her head. "Sanan's going to live! Shouldn't we be happy?"

"If he can't use his hand, he won't be able to fight anymore." Satomi

explained, keeping the words simple.

"If his injury is severe, he may never carry a blade again." Saito said almost simultaneously, his words meshing with Satomi's. The two glanced at each other for a moment, though the nonverbal exchange wasn't an awkward one- they had been thinking the exact same thing.

"Oh . . ." Chizuru said, looking at her hands. Satomi worried that her oddly synchronous explanation with Saito made the girl feel like she was being lectured.

"At least he's alive." Sae added, much to Satomi's surprise. Her friend didn't seem like the type to pipe up with an opposing argument. More importantly, Satomi found herself agreeing with her.

"You're right. Even if he can't fight, at least he can live." Satomi concurred. She frowned, wondering if she should continue her thought- her heart quickening its pace, she spoke again. "Unfortunately, from what I've experienced, the samurai seem to take little value in life."

"Hey . . . what's that supposed to mean?" Shinpachi said, narrowing his eyes. Heisuke raised an eyebrow, a look of complete befuddlement crossing his face. Sano simply stared at the floor, his hand on the bandages wrapped around his abdomen. Now Satomi regretted finishing her thought- she had a feeling she knew what those bandages were meant to cover up now. Shinpachi continued, his voice full of pride. "Any one of us would give up our lives for the Shinsengumi- how much more valuable does it get than that?"

"That's not valuing it at all!" Satomi countered, exasperated. She was entering the place of no return, yet she just kept talking, unable to stop herself. "Giving it up-"

"Settle down, children." Okita interjected. He was admonishing them, yet his voice was still gentle- his scoldings really did make her feel like a child. Still, she hadn't finished, and now she would restlessly fume for the next minute or so. "This is about Sanan, remember? He's not gonna just give up. If push comes to shove, he'll have to take it."

"Don't jinx him, Souji." Shinpachi said, crossing his arms. "It's gonna look bad if officers start joining the Corps."

"Huh . . .?" Chizuru looked up- along with Sae, she had looked like she wanted to shrink into herself a moment ago. Now she gave Shinpachi a questioning glance. "But . . . what do you mean 'Corps'? Isn't that the Shinsengumi?"

"Well, normally, yeah." Heisuke said. "You might call the Shinsengumi the 'Elite Volunteer Corps'. When we talk about 'the Corps' though, we-"

"Heisuke!" Sano leapt up and drove a fist into Heisuke's stomach, nearly knocking the wind out of him. The boy curled up on the floor, clutching his stomach.

"Heisuke! Are you all right?!" Chizuru cried, kneeling next to him.

Satomi's thoughts had begun to wander back to the previous argument, but now she was startled to the present.

"Sano, you're overreacting." Shinpachi said, his statement shouted like an order. "Heisuke, think before you open that damn mouth!"

Sano whispered an apology to Heisuke, his golden eyes aimed to the floor in shame. Heisuke returned the apology with a tight smile. "Nah, I should've been watching what I said. Still . . . Sano, you start throwin' those things around too easily . . ."

Shinpachi turned his attention to the girls. "That's all you're going to hear about this particular topic. I'm sure you're curious, but we can't tell you anything else, so don't ask."

Satomi didn't know why he was aiming it towards all of them- she could care less about these "Corps". As if to echo her sentiments, Sae spoke. "Do not worry yourself! The inner affairs of the Shinsengumi truly do not concern us."

Chizuru wasn't satisfied. "But . . ."

Satomi suppressed a sigh. It was better to just drop it. There was no guarantee that it had anything to do with them in any case.

"It's nothing you need to worry yourself about. You don't have to get all worked up." Shinpachi said, revealing a gentle smile to Chizuru that she had never seen before.

"Put it from your mind." Saito added. He turned to Sae and Satomi. "Perhaps now would be a good time to retire to bed."

"That's fine." Satomi said, standing up. She was grateful that nobody had brought up how little she had eaten. "Thanks for the food."

"Yes, thank you all so much, I had a wonderful time!" Sae gushed, dipping into another bow. "It was nice to meet all of you, and the food was delicious!"

Smiles reappeared on the captains' faces, and the men called out tired farewells to their backs as they began to follow Saito back to their room, Chizuru still appearing slightly dissatisfied.

[illegible]

Her breath appeared before her eyes, materializing like small puffs of fog in the cold February air. It felt good to stretch her legs, and she relished the feeling of her calf muscles extending with each leap to a tree branch. Though it had only been one day since she'd been kept inside, it felt like a century.

Satomi wasn't supposed to be out, and she knew this well. Nor should she be running around, dressed in the garb of an assassin, while the captains slumbered peacefully inside. But she couldn't help it- she had lived her entire life being active during the night. She could only bear sitting in the dark room for so long, her legs restricted to one position in a yukata. She had at least considered her actions



for a good few minutes before slinking out of the hidden door, an exuberant smile plastered on her face. It was true that it was cold, and she detested it- but nothing beat the feeling of sprinting around in the dead of night.

Perching on a tree to catch her breath, Satomi had made her way to the front of the building. She allowed herself to admire the trees that littered the front yard, the lack of leaves causing them to appear spindly and sharp, a dangerous sight. It was an entirely different appearance compared to the harmless lush colors of the foliage in spring.

Just as she began to spring off her current perch and move on to the next one, she spotted movement near the front doors. Squinting, Satomi saw a group of about twenty soldiers entering the building, dressed in the familiar light blue coats of the Shinsengumi. She hopped down to the grass, her palms scraping the rough bark, and silently approached the entrance, taking care not to be spotted.

"\_What are soldiers doing entering the building at this time of night?\_" she thought, crouching in the shadows. Though it was likely an event of minor significance, she always felt a certain level of excitement when spying. She was about to step forward to get a closer look when cold steel pressed against her neck, and all manner of exhilaration turned to dread.

"Move and I'll kill you." A deep voice whispered into her ear. She shivered, though she didn't know if it was due to the cold, fear, or . . . something else. The warm texture of skin pressed against her bare shoulder, most likely her assailant's arm. His tone was heavy, like lead- there was no doubt that the person behind her would kill her in an instant given a slight provocation.

Knowing this, she did what anyone else would never dare to do- she moved. Satomi ducked, gripping the man's wrist in both hands like a vice, and twisted with all of her might while spinning to face her opponent. The motion was so fast that she had even made herself dizzy in the process, the adrenaline in her system bringing every part of her to life, and she fought to remain in control of herself.

"Ah-!" The resulting groan came directly from the gut, sounding more like an animal being stepped on than a person. The sword was wrenched from his grasp, and Satomi moved to grab it, her body responding to muscle memory. But she was trembling far too much- she fumbled, and the weapon spun briefly through the air and landed a few feet away.

It was then that she got a good look at her attacker's face. He was older, his features more mature, his jet-black hair blending seamlessly with the night sky. His eyes were an unnatural violet color, mere slits in the dark. But what she noticed most of all was that not only was he wearing an expression of complete bewilderment, but also absolute, unadulterated \_rage\_.

Satomi spun on her heels, her legs shaking with terror as she bolted. It wasn't enough- a strong arm wrapped around her midsection, scooping her up and onto his shoulder, his grip like an iron bar on her back. The ground was moving helplessly underneath her now, and she twisted violently, trying to squirm from his grasp.

"You thought you could run?!" He growled, tightening his hold. She was locked down to his shoulder now, and he was carrying her somewhere- giving up the idea of wriggling free, she began to pound on his back with her fists, the light blue coat of his uniform flapping with the effort.

"\_Let me go!\_" Satomi shrieked, the blood rushing to her head. The grass below her turned into the wooden floors of the Shinsengumi residence, and her fear only intensified. She scrambled for her obi, squeezing her fingers underneath the fabric, and grabbed a small knife hidden underneath. Holding the handle tightly in one clenched fist, she brought her arm up high, preparing to bring the blade down into his back-

But she was thrown roughly to the floor, and the knife flew from her hand, the hard metal scraping against the floors as it skidded away. She barely had time to move before another sword was pointed at her throat, the tip digging into her neck. The man she had disarmed moments ago was now kneeling above her, a leg on either side of her waist, his face mere inches from hers. The new weapon threatening to kill her was a shorter sword, the other likely still laying abandoned outside.

"Who are you spying for? Choshu?" he said, and she could feel his hot breath on her face. In the corner of her eye she could see other soldiers standing in a circle around them, though she couldn't make out details- his face was so close to hers that it almost took up her entire vision.

"I'm not spying for anyone!" Satomi gasped. She tried to keep her voice steady, but she only managed to sound like a tiny, frightened child.

The sword pressed harder into her skin. "Lying won't help you. Do you think you can hide what you're up to?" he said, and Satomi couldn't see an ounce of sympathy in his eyes. He had already run out of patience with her. This was okay- she was out of patience as well.

"You don't get it, do you?" she hissed, and the blade scraped against her throat with each syllable. She could feel hot liquid begin to pool around the puncture wound, but she continued anyway- it would heal up soon, if she could survive this. "I'm not-"

She felt his fingers gently brush against her cheek, and she stopped mid-sentence. His eyes had narrowed into slits, and he stared at her with such intensity that she felt like fleeing, however much it would slash her neck in the process. He pressed the tip of his thumb to the corner of her mouth, lifting her upper lip. Blushing furiously, she tore her face away from his grasp, but it was too late- her teeth had been bared.

"Demon . . ." he said, his eyes wide. He stood up, yanking her roughly to her feet by the back collar of her short yukata. The sword never left her throat. "I'm taking her to the back room for questioning. She's not leaving this house alive."

Satomi's heart hammered against her chest- in his hands, death seemed inevitable. "Just wake up the commander!" she begged, the pitch of

her voice growing higher in panic. "I \_swear\_-"

"Satomi?"

She froze. In front of her was Sae, dressed in a silk kimono, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her tired gaze wandered from Satomi's face to the sword pressed against her neck, blinking in surprise.

"\_Shit\_." Satomi cursed silently.

"Shit." Her assailant repeated. "They're \_everywhere\_. What \_happened\_ while I was gone?" He turned to the soldiers behind him and pointed a finger at Sae. "Grab this one too. I need to figure out-"

"\_I don't think so.\_" Satomi grabbed the blade with her bare hand and ripped it away from her throat, blood pouring from her palm. She elbowed the man in the chest with her other arm and spun around, aiming a sweeping kick to his ankles while simultaneously pressing every ounce of her weight against him, successfully bringing him to the floor. She wrenched the sword away from his grasp and successfully wrapped her fingers around the handle this time, twirling the blade around until it was aimed at his neck. Trembling, she sat on his chest, the blood from her palm dripping down the white metal until it reached the soft skin of his throat. "Sorry. I take my job seriously."

Satomi expected a stunned reaction, perhaps even an enraged one. But he merely looked at her knowingly, before his lips slowly curled into a sinister smile. "So do we."

Every inch of her turned cold. She looked up to find the sword of every Shinsengumi soldier in the room pointed in her direction, their expressions unyielding.

"Oh . . ." Satomi uttered, dropping the man's weapon. The blade clattered the ground, and she stood, her palms open, as if to show she had no more intentions to do harm. The cut on her hand was healing at an amazing pace, and one last drop of blood was oozing down her arm.

"Stop! Please! We're guests!" Sae was pleading, her form lost behind the crowd of soldiers that were steadily advancing toward Satomi. Her attacker was on his feet now, and he looked at her like she was nothing, a mere annoyance to be demolished in front of his eyes. Sae continued her plea, her voice rising with each request. "Don't hurt her! Please! She didn't do anything!"

"\_Just run!\_" Satomi thought, gritting her teeth. It was unlikely she'd get out of this now- she had gone too far to be considered for questioning, and much too far to be considered harmless. Her last chance was to do absolutely nothing in an attempt to assure them that she was done struggling. Though she had the feeling that her assailant would enjoy seeing her slashed to ribbons either way.

"\_Listen to me!\_" Sae was shrieking, her words falling on deaf ears no matter how loud she made them. "\_As the pureblood descendant of the Tsukishima clan, I command you to cease at once!\_"

"What's with all the shouting?"

A familiar, groggy voice came from the front hallway, and Satomi never thought she'd be so grateful to see Shinpachi standing there, nonchalantly scratching his side. Beside him were Sano, Heisuke and Okita, looking exhausted and confused, some of them holding lit candles.

"Whoa . . ." Sano said, assessing the situation before him. "What's going on here?"

"I-I'll get Commander Kondou!" Heisuke stammered, darting out of the room.

The black-haired man never moved from his spot, his eyes trained on Satomi, as if she would run at any moment. "Enemy spies." he said. "Search the house."

"Let's just wait till the commander gets here, shall we?" Okita smiled, amused despite the severity of the situation.

"Do what I say!" the man barked, his voice unexpectedly loud.

Commander Kondou rushed in, Heisuke trailing behind him. "\_Lower your weapons!\_" he shouted, and if Satomi thought her attacker's voice was loud, Kondou's voice was deafening. She had never heard the man yell before, and wasn't sure if she ever wanted to again.

The soldiers lowered their swords hesitantly, their eyes inspecting their leader for a confirmation.

"What?!" The man spat, turning a fiery gaze to Kondou.

The commander didn't flinch- in fact, he almost seemed to physically deflate. "They're our guests, by my decision." he admitted with a sigh. "This is my fault, Toshi. I wanted to warn you ahead of time, but I hadn't predicted you'd come back at such a late hour . . ." He turned to the girls, his expression apologetic. ". . . or that you'd find them before I could get to you."

Satomi knew he didn't mean any ill will by his words, but she felt terrible anyway. He had wanted to warn Toshi- or the rumored Demon Hijikata, rather- in order to lessen the blow but both she and Sae had left their rooms and messed it up. She saw Sae lower her head in her peripheral vision.

She prepared herself for an argument, but Hijikata reluctantly returned his bloodied sword to its sheathe, and the sound of metal scraping against metal echoed through the room as each of his soldiers did the same. He sighed, surprisingly docile. "What were you thinking?" he said in a defeated whisper.

Kondou treated him to a sheepish grin. "Come, Toshi. I'll tell you everything in the common room. Let's let everyone get some rest."

[illegible]

**\*\*Author's Note:** Thanks to all of the readers so far! I'd really like

to know what all of you are thinking, so please leave a review!\*\*

## 6. Chapter 6: Feline Fiasco

Author's Note:

Reviews and criticisms welcome and appreciated!

This chapter is from Kyoko's POV.

\*\*Keep in mind that Kyoko is not aware of Chizuru's real gender, hence some of the incorrect pronouns I've used with her!\*\*

### Chapter 6: Feline Fiasco

"Crap! I'm late!"

Kyoko hurtled out of the sleeping quarters, a hair tie clenched tightly between gritted teeth. Her bare feet slapped the polished wooden floors of the common room before jumping onto the grass outside, working her locks into a high ponytail. She rounded the corner, picking up speed, when-

"Gah!"

-she collided with Commander Kondou, her face burying itself into his robe for a moment before she bounced off, almost tipping backwards. A wave of deja vu hit her, and she had to shake it off, forcing herself to conjure up an appropriate apology.

"Tsugunaga!" Kondou boomed before she could open her mouth, his expression unperturbed. The man looked like he hadn't moved at all from this collision, and he stood confidently, arms akimbo. "Heading to morning training, I take it?"

"Yep!" Kyoko responded, practically jogging in place. She was already late, and though the commander must have known this, his warm smile indicated he wasn't vexed at all. Thankfully Sanan wasn't accompanying him this time- she had already considered him to be an off-putting man, but after his arm injury he had advanced to frightening. She likely wouldn't have escaped this situation so easily with him in tow.

"Harada and Nagakura are in charge of training today. I believe Okita is helping out on a late breakfast." Kondou informed her, the grin still wide on his face. Kyoko thought she could spot a sly wink within his words- whether she deserved it or not, the commander was looking out for her.

A sigh of relief escaped her. Kyoko could handle Harada and Nagakura- it was the 1st Division captain she had been worried about. She felt her body gradually relax, and her legs ceased their impatient jogging. "Oh, good!" she said, unable to hide her high spirits.

Kondou didn't question her newfound enthusiasm. "Good luck today, Tsugunaga!" he said, lifting an exuberant fist in the air.

"Thanks!" Kyoko called over her shoulder as she sprinted off again, making her way around the premises and cutting through the courtyard. She lifted a knee to step back into the building, formulating excuse after excuse in her mind, each one lazier than the ones before- with Harada's leniency and Nagakura's lack of insight, arriving late to training required far less effort on her part.

"\_snk snk snk! snk snk . .\_"

She stopped short, her feet never crossing the threshold. A strange noise glided to her ears from the courtyard, and Kyoko whirled around, scanning the area for its source. Not a soul was in sight- the sound may have merely originated from an insect. She spun around to enter the building again.

"\_Meow!\_"

She froze. \_That\_ was definitely a cat.

Abandoning the training session, Kyoko slunk around the courtyard, her eyes wandering the perimeter. A flash of gold caught her attention, and she ambled over to investigate, her footsteps silent.

What she saw made her breath catch in her throat- a pale, thin arm was stretching from the wall, quietly beckoning over an orange tabby with slow flicks of the wrist. Upon closer inspection, the limb was coming from inside the building, squeezing through a small crack in the structure that may have originally intended to be a door. The cat circled the mysterious arm, rubbing its neck lovingly on the elbow, pushing its sides against a hand. Another burst of gold- it was coming from inside of the hidden room. The door inched wider.

"\_snk snk snk snk . . .\_"

Kyoko suppressed a gasp as she saw a woman behind the concealed walls, flaxen hair tumbling over her shoulders like many fine strands of gold. Unobstructed by the tiny gap, a dark kimono sleeve slid down to cover her white arm, and the feline poked its head within, sniffing at its contents. A smile played on her lips.

"\_snk snk snk snk . . .\_" The foreign woman called, her tongue rapping the roof of her mouth. The cat extended its back to her palm in response, its eyelids lowered in contentment.

"\_It's one of the girls from before . . .\_" Kyoko thought, admiring the woman's fair features. She had almost forgotten their guests entirely- they were kept secluded from others most of the time, with the captains being their sole acquaintances. She had occasionally seen them walking through the hallways accompanied by Saito or Harada, but after the huge ruckus of late February- none of which the soldiers were allowed to hear about- she didn't see a trace of them at all. After a while, most assumed they had left the premises.

With one last look at the girl, Kyoko quietly began to head back to the training room.

"\_Meow!\_"

A serene cry resounded from behind her, and she turned to glance at

the animal once again. At that moment the tabby was the most tranquil creature she had ever seen, its fur gliding over the girl's white skin, its head stretching to meet her touch. The low purr could be heard clearly even from a distance. Neither girl nor cat took notice of Kyoko, the two seemingly trapped in their own little world.

She knew she shouldn't do it. She knew she should attend training, make excuses, and go about her day. She knew it would only cause trouble.

But Kyoko couldn't resist.

"\_BAAAAH!\_" She shrieked, leaping in front of the feline with her arms raised high above her head. After a jump that reached an impressive height, the cat darted into the gap in the wall and past the blond girl, who gave an uncharacteristic scream of shock and tipped backwards, landing on her rear. With an icy glare that could kill hundreds, the girl snapped the secret door shut, leaving Kyoko in uncontrollable fits of laughter.

"Ahahahaha! Sorry! I couldn't resist!" Kyoko admitted to the paper door, holding her stomach. She blinked away tears, raising her voice to reach past the barrier between them. "Hey, the cat ran in there you know!"

Silence.

Kyoko shrugged, turning her back and finally trotting back into the building. An inkling of guilt scratched at her heart- she hadn't meant to scare the girl too, though it was an added bonus. She thought back to the cat's graceless hop into the air and burst into giggles again- any ounce of guilt didn't bother her for long, due to the situation being just plain funny.

"\_Pssst!\_"

She had only strolled past the kitchen when another sound hissed into her ear. Frowning, she continued- she was done with strange noises for the day. If she arrived any later to training, even Harada and Nagakura couldn't save her.

"\_Hey Kyo!\_" A familiar whisper whirled her around, and Kyoko's heart climbed into her throat- Captain Okita had poked his head out of the kitchen, and was now beckoning her over with a curl of his finger. "C'mere, c'mere!" he cooed with a sly grin, before ducking back into the room.

Obligation tugged at her back, but the smell of soup and the captain's orders dragged her inside, where the rumblings of broth cooking filled the kitchen. Captain Saito was stirring the pot of soup, his back to her, his eyes fixed rigidly on its contents. Okita was crouched in front of the fire, absentmindedly tossing in a piece of wood. He looked up at her, the same sneaky grin still stuck on his face.

"Mind helping us out?" he said, pulling himself up to a stand. Kyoko had to lift her head to meet his gaze- at his full height, he practically towered over her. "The page had cooking duty today, but that idiot's not up yet. As you can see, we're running a bit behind."

"That won't be necessary, Souji." Saito said, stirring the food in lazy circles. His black kimono sleeves were tied up with white cloth, preventing the fabric from dipping into the soup. "I've got this under control."

Okita didn't hear him. He tossed Kyoko a long strand of white cloth as well, the object unfurling in her clumsy hands. "Hope you're a good cook." he challenged, a playful glimmer dancing in his green eyes.

Her heart rate slowed. She had almost believed she was in trouble, but it looked like his desire for help overrode any urge to chide her. Kyoko beamed. "Are you kidding?! I'm an amazing cook!" she exclaimed, tying up her kimono sleeves within seconds. She paused- this could be a trap. The missed training session deserved at least a mention, lest she appear as though she forgot it or intended to skip it. If she had learned anything about the captain, it was that he could easily fool anyone into a scolding. "Are you sure? I'm supposed to be training now!"

Okita softened. "Relax. I'm your captain, and I say it's okay, so it's okay." he assured her firmly, his arms crossed. He spun around and departed the kitchen, his next words drifting in from the corridor. "Time to wake up the page!"

Kyoko drew in a breath of anticipation and scanned the cooking utensils, her hands on her hips. "So! What shall I help with?"

Saito's words were as apathetic as ever, though they hid some authority behind them. "It's acceptable to return to training now, regardless of what Souji says." he said without looking at her. "He's just toying with you. We're perfectly capable of managing this on our own."

"It's okay, I like cooking!" Kyoko chirped, plucking a knife from the table. She glided over to a pile of discarded vegetables and began eagerly chopping them into thin slices, lightly humming a tune under her breath.

An exasperated sigh finally tore its way from Saito's throat. "Regardless of whether or not-"

"\_Meow!\_"

An orange tabby strode into the kitchen, a rough tongue sliding over its lips. Its tail wiggled in excitement, and the feline eyed a mound of uncooked fish with greedy eyes. It sprang onto the tabletop, earnestly pushing a cheek against the edge of an unused pot.

"What is a \_cat\_ doing here?" Saito lowered his eyebrows in mild concern, his attention finally leaving the soup.

Kyoko smiled. "It's the cat from earlier!" she cried, abandoning the vegetables and approaching the animal. "Here kitty kitty! \_snk snk snk\_ . . ."

The cat looked at her, its pupils dilating until its eyes were as dark as night. Every strand of fur stood on end, and it backed away



with its back raised and claws extended. A slow, long hiss poured out through fanged teeth.

"Aw, c'mon!" Kyoko whined. "Are you still mad?!"

"Kyo, I suggest you leave it alone." Saito warned, his normally calm voice wavering. "We will dispose of it in a less hazardous environment."

"No no, wait, hold on!" Kyoko urged, tugging a piece of fish from the stack and using her knife to cut off a small sliver. The fish was what the cat wanted- and if it cooperated, that was what the cat would get.

She inched her hand forward, a slimy piece of trout clamped between two fingers. "Look! Fish for you!" she coddled, wiggling the seafood enticingly in front of its nose. The cat's stance didn't change- it only retreated further, its tail encountering the wall behind it. A dangerous yowl reverberated from its body, its ears flattened against its head. "C'mon, I thought you wanted-"

The words were barely out of her mouth before the cat bolted, scampering desperately over pots and pans, the heavy objects loudly clattering to the floor in a heap. It pounced into the food in an explosion of dead fish and vegetables, slipping and sliding over the disarray of meat. Fish rained to the ground in wet thuds.

"Stop it!" Saito shouted, reaching out a hand to grab the feline but only managed to close his fist on air. Kyoko scrambled to seize the bundle of fur but slipped on a piece of trout, falling face-first on the heap of cooking equipment below. The knife in her hand was sent flying, and Saito just barely dodged it with a quick sidestep, the sharp blade taking a few strands of hair with it. The dagger stuck into the wall behind him, the hilt wobbling with the force. "Hey! Pay attention to what you're doing!"

"Sorryyyyy . . ." Kyoko whimpered, stumbling to her feet while rubbing her head. The cat was circling the boiling pot of soup now, its tail puffed up to an enormous size. She dove for the animal and wrapped it into her arms tightly, the struggling mass of fur sending tumbleweeds of hair flying in all directions. She turned to Saito and held it up triumphantly. "I got it!"

A hideous yowl erupted from the cat and it began ferociously clawing, attempting to aim its swipes at her face, her arms, anywhere it could possibly reach. "Aaaah!" Kyoko screamed, involuntarily taking a few steps back.

Saito's eyes widened as he saw the impending outcome of this action. "Kyo, noooooo!" he shouted, racing to stop her motions.

It was too late- her back bumped into the handle of the soup pot, simultaneously dropping the trembling feline. The pot tottered once, twice, before finally capsizing completely, sending a cascade of hot soup pouring to the floor.

"Yow!" Kyoko cried, jumping from the steaming river of soup after a few drops landed on the back of her legs. The cat scurried out of the room, the avalanche of boiling liquid hot on its heels. "Damn cat!"

"We must catch it." Saito said, leaping over the mess and pursuing the animal. Kyoko tiptoed hurriedly over the pond of soup, taking one last mournful look at the wasted food before following Saito. She was surprised she was able to keep up with the man on an empty stomach- both of them chased after the frightened cat, its legs moving rapidly to pick up speed.

"Aah!" A passerby emitted a grunt of shock as Kyoko's shoulder encountered theirs. She looked behind her to shout a quick apology to find that it was Susumu Yamazaki of the Watch, his cry of surprise uncharacteristic for his normally stoic nature. He chased after them, his swift legs carrying him to their side within seconds. "A cat?! Don't tell me this is Okita's . . . Take responsibility and get it under control!"

Kyoko opened her mouth to explain the situation but her words caught in her throat- Okita and Yukimura, the page, had stepped out of the room directly in front of them, their expressions puzzled.

"\_CATCH THAT LITTLE SHIT!\_" Kyoko screamed unbridled, and Okita leaped into action, swooping down to grasp the cat within his arms. The tabby smoothly hopped aside, dashing around him. Yukimura simply stood there, seemingly overwhelmed with astonishment and bafflement. "Dammit!"

"How pathetic. A captain of the Shinsengumi can't even catch a cat . . ." Saito snarked as Okita jumped to his feet and gave chase as well. Yukimura followed, his dismal jog causing him to fall behind almost instantly.

"I don't see you doing any better, Hajime!" Okita retorted, skidding to a stop after turning a corner. They were outside now- a spring breeze brushed over Kyoko's flushed cheeks, and she stopped behind the group of men to catch her breath. The cat was nowhere to be found.

"Seems we've lost sight of it." Yamazaki stated. He ascended a nearby tree with grace and agility, peering over the Shinsengumi grounds with one hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

"Stupid cat . . ." Kyoko grumbled, pushing the leaves of a bush aside to search for any movement. Her stomach grumbled in protest as well- now it was impossible to tell when they'd receive breakfast.

"Hey!"

Kyoko turned to see Nagakura and Harada jogging over to them, their expressions bleak. Her heart sank to her gut- she had missed training today. She tilted her head down, hoping they wouldn't notice her.

But their concerns were far worse than her skipped training session. "What on earth is going on?!" Nagakura snarled, his bulky arms crossed. "We heard the commotion- the kitchen is a mess! Do you know how furious Inoue is gonna be?! How furious Hijikata will be?!"

Saito sighed, a drop of sweat trickling down his temple. "It's . . .

an unfortunate story."

"That freaking \_cat\_ came out of nowhere and knocked everything down!" Kyoko summarized heatedly, forgetting her anonymity. She neglected to mention the soup disaster- it was the cat who started it, after all.

Harada scratched his head, a look of dread creasing his handsome features. "Somebody's gonna have to clean that up . . ."

"Not it!" Kyoko shouted before anyone could respond, waving one enthusiastic hand in the air. It was a fact that she loved cleaning, but not \_that\_ much. Especially with no food to push her through it.

"That's interesting . . ." Saito purred, and Kyoko got the feeling she wasn't going to like what he would say next. "I seem to remember that \_you\_ were the cause of some of the damage yourself."

Kyoko gulped. "Well . . ." she murmured, turning her gaze to the grass. She silently cursed. Saito was always an aloof man, but never had she seen him behave so \_bitterly\_.

"Well \_someone\_ is going to have to clean it up and make more food! If I don't get breakfast . . ." Nagakura griped, letting his thought trail. He sighed in defeat. "So much wasted food . . . I guess we could use some of it for fertilizer . . ."

"So there's a brain in there after all!" Kyoko quipped, desperate to steer the attention away from herself. In all honesty, she hadn't expected such an insightful thought to come from Nagakura. Even after her long stay with the Shinsengumi, the captains still managed to surprise her.

"What was that?!" Nagakura growled through gritted teeth. Her plan had backfired- all eyes were on her, the target of the 2nd Division captain's wrathful gaze. Thankfully, Okita chuckled, and Nagakura pounced. "Souji, control your soldier!"

Okita merely treated him to a wry smile. "I can't help it if they learn things from me!"

Harada stepped in, eager to extinguish the fire. "Shin, since you're so adamant then perhaps you should take care of the kitchen." he said. He flinched when Nagakura inevitably turned to him with an expression of utter betrayal. Harada held up his palms in defense. "Don't worry, I'll help too. I'm sure we'll laugh about this later."

Nagakura grumbled under his breath, a few choice words escaping here and there, but overall he seemed compliant. Saito jumped on the opening.

"Then we will take care of the cat issue and dispose of it before it becomes a bigger problem." he said, before turning to Yukimura. "Chi-Yukimura. We could use your help. Would you rather clean the kitchen or look for the cat?"

Yukimura pondered this for a moment before speaking up. "The cat has caused enough of a mess. We should take care of that

first."

"Exactly." Saito said, and Kyoko noticed the man's voice softened when speaking with the page. "We cannot allow a second disaster to happen or we'll be unable to show our faces to Hijikata. It must be captured immediately."

Saito looked from Kyoko to Yukimura, and then back again. Kyoko froze. "\_Please don't make me clean\_." she prayed. She knew she wouldn't be much help with hunting for the cat- the animal was obviously scared of her, and would only dash away with each encounter. But it was better than cleaning with Harada and Nagakura.

"He'll be fine." Okita told his companion. Kyoko didn't know what he meant by that but he seemed to be defending her- Saito's stern expression wavered, and suspicious eyes darted to Okita.

"I hope you are aware of the risks, Souji." Saito warned, before turning around. "Fine. Okita, Yukimura, Kyo and I will search for the cat. More numbers should grant us a higher chance of success, in any case."

Kyoko couldn't subdue a sigh of relief. She followed the Cat Search Team to the courtyard, Nagakura's irritated complaints trailing in the direction of the kitchen. The courtyard was where she had first found the cat- her eyes wandered to the line in the wall of the building, one she knew could separate. The secret route was closed now though, and one would scarcely think to examine the area. She scanned the treeline- Yamazaki was nowhere to be found, and she assumed the spy had wandered off to search on his own.

"I don't see it anywhere . . ." Yukimura commented. The courtyard seemed devoid of all life in general, save for the occasional twitter of a bird.

"I can't sense its presence hidden in this area at all." Saito concurred. "It doesn't seem to be here."

"We're just going to have to spread out and look everywhere then." Okita sighed, already bored of their current plight. "If only it'd leave headquarters on its own . . . I get the feeling it doesn't want to be that helpful . . ."

Saito scowled. "We cannot relax our guard, or our search, until we receive word that the animal has truly left and does not plan to return." he said, his words stiff with determination. Kyoko doubted that Saito would be able to discern what the cat was planning or not planning to do, but she bit her tongue. She dared not cross him today.

"Man . . . Loosen up a bit, Hajime. You're way too serious for this situation." Okita yawned, lifting his arms into a stretch. Kyoko agreed with him, though she kept her mouth shut- only a fellow captain could get away with a direct comment like that.

"\_Waaaaaaaah!\_"

A long, drawn-out wail echoed over the courtyard, and Kyoko peered in

the direction it came from, drowning out Saito's retort. At first, she couldn't tell if it was a child weeping or a the warbling call of a large bird. After a moment of careful listening, there was no mistake- it was the sobbing of a child.

"Seems like someone's upset." Kyoko piped up, interrupting whatever unnecessary banter was progressing between the captains. Saito turned a pair of dark blue eyes her way.

"Yes, I am upset." he glowered. "When I am forced to cooperate with people who do not take the situation as seriously as I do, it places a lot of responsibility on my shoulders."

Kyoko sighed. "Not you." she said. Though with his current behavior, it was almost becoming similar to a child's bawling. "The child crying. Don't you hear it?"

The captains stared at her blankly, as if awaiting a punch line. Kyoko fidgeted- it wasn't possible that they didn't hear it . . . was it?

"I heard it too." Yukimura said, coming to her rescue. The men exchanged puzzled glances, and the resulting silence was almost too much to bear. Yukimura shrank under their gaze. "S-sorry. It probably has nothing to do with the cat."

"I doubt the voice, or whatever it is you two claim to have heard, will lead us to a clue regarding the cat's location but . . ." Saito began, staring at the page with an emotion similar to pity. "We should determine the truth before we dismiss it out of hand."

"Yeah. And besides, if it really is someone crying, something had to have happened and we might have to deal with it." Okita contributed, adjusting the tie in his hair. He seemed excited for the potential distraction- it was obvious he was beyond weary of the cat chaos. "Let's go see what's going on."

The four trekked over to uncover the origin of the cries, their journey eventually taking them to the next building over, which contained the Yagi household. The Shinsengumi shared a residence with the Yagi family, and the members were more than accommodating- though the number of recruits kept on growing, the Yagis continued to share space with them. Standing in front of the building was a small child, his face smeared with tears, his eyes hidden behind soaked fingers. The awful wail continued to pour from his mouth.

"Little Nobu!" Kyoko gasped, rushing to his side. Despite her intentions not to involve herself too much with the Yagi's kids, she always found herself unable to resist their frequent requests to play. Once she obtained the reputation for accepting these invitations, she began to receive more and more requests to play from the kids- an activity she rarely got punished for, considering Okita often found himself roped into playing with them as well. Due to these frequent deeds, she knew the names of each one of them, Nobu included. "What's wrong?!"

"I worked really hard to catch it . . ." Little Nobu said, his words barely intelligible through his sobs. He sloppily wiped tears from his eyes with the back of his hands. "But the kitty ran away . . ."

"So you're the cause of this whole mess. You brought the cat into our headquarters." Saito concluded, seemingly unconcerned with his harsh tone. "I must get more information out of him . . ."

Kyoko's lips tightened, forcing a spontaneous laugh back down her throat. It was entirely possible that the child was not the culprit- she had seen a blond-haired suspect herself, though she wouldn't say a word. The girls seemed to have enough trouble on their plate as it was without her adding extra offenses.

Nobu didn't defend himself, but only bawled more than ever before, lifting his head to the sky in an unabashed display of public weeping. Saito merely stared at him blankly, at a loss.

"Awww, look what you did!" Kyoko chided Saito, patting the child lightly on the back. She couldn't get too angry- Saito was one who simply stated whatever was most logical to him at the time, without considering how his phrases could sting others. Still, it was a flaw that needed attention, though none were willing to inform him.

"Oh no!" Yukimura exclaimed, kneeling at the boy's other side. He placed a comforting hand on his tiny shoulder. "It's okay. Don't cry . . ."

"See? It's because you made a scary face at him Hajime." Okita rebuked, covering his ears with his hands. "Take responsibility and make him stop!"

Saito's lips curled downward in irritation. "Don't speak nonsense." he said. "You like kids, Souji." Kyoko blinked- it was true that Okita adored children on most occasions, but his statement almost implied that Saito didn't receive the same satisfaction from being in a child's company. Apparently this particular occasion was one in which Okita felt similarly, and the two men glared at each other, having both reached a stalemate. Then, for some reason unknown to Kyoko, they both stared pointedly at the page.

Yukimura looked as though he wanted to disappear. After a few seconds of lingering and awkward silence, he conceded. "A-all right! I'll try something!" he said, offering a smile to the sobbing child. "So, um, you were taking care of the cat then?" he began tentatively. His question was met with a rough shake of the head. Yukimura seemed at a loss for words. "Um, well . . . I'd be really sad if a cat ran away from me too. But don't you think the cat might've had a good reason?" This time Nobu paused, his tears temporarily ceasing their continuous descent. Yukimura continued. "Um . . . We're actually looking for the cat, like you are. Can you think of anything that would help? Anywhere it might want to go?" Another pause. Nobu pondered for a moment before his features contorted again, and he erupted into another long wail. The page recoiled. "What?! S-sorry!"

Kyoko grinned- she had been waiting patiently, and now it was her turn. "Lemme try something." she urged, and Yukimura moved aside, a disappointed frown on his face. Wordlessly, Kyoko stuck her fingers into her mouth and stretched her lips into a grotesque smile, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue. "Bleeeeeeeh!"

Nobu's tear-filled eyes widened- then at last he smiled, and a giggle escaped his lips. The boy's delighted expression mimicked her own,

and Kyoko distorted her features into another exaggerated face, eliciting more laughter from the child.

"\_Ahahahaha!\_" Another set of laughter mixed with Nobu's, and Kyoko turned around to see Okita bent over, holding his stomach, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably. "Ahahaha! That's great!"

"The fact that you laugh so easily at faces meant for children is somewhat embarrassing." Saito said, brushing his long black bangs from his eyes.

Okita recovered from his abrupt laughing fit, wiping his own tears from his eyes. "Hey, if it's funny, I laugh!" he told his companion before crouching down in front of Nobu. "Here, lemme try!"

Using his fingers to stretch his eyelids, Okita pulled up his nose with the edge of his thumb, turning down his lips into an extreme grimace. Nobu fell over with laughter, and Kyoko joined in, pressing her hands to her sore cheeks. Even Yukimura could be seen attempting to stifle a chuckle with one hand.

"It's as I thought." Saito said, never cracking a smile. "You two have lost sight of why we are here. Neither of you have learned to restrain yourself. There are limits."

Kyoko's enthusiasm fled her immediately, and she finally dared to aim a glare his way. "Geez, what crawled up your ass today?! This isn't like you!" she blurted out before she could censor herself in front of Nobu. She was past caring- Saito's behavior was not only unusual for his calm demeanor, but also bordering on unbearable. All previous laughter ceased at once, leaving the group in uncomfortable silence.

At first Saito's expression didn't seem to change, and he wore the same nonchalant mask as usual- but then she could see it. One eyebrow twitched. "You two are the ones behaving out of norm. You've completely lost your focus." he said, before turning his back to them and walking in the other direction, his pace slightly faster than usual. "Yukimura and I will go search for the cat on our own. I only hope you two get serious about this quickly."

Yukimura jumped to his feet. "Saito?! Wait!" he called, jogging weakly after him. He risked one hesitant look behind him, and an unspoken apology adorned his face before he sped after the black-haired captain. From this direction, the page's gait looked so feminine that one could easily mistake him for a small girl.

Kyoko watched their retreating forms for a while, her arms crossed. "What's his problem?"

Okita remained unperturbed. "Oh well. Let him go." he said. His lips spread into a knowing smile. "He might just be hungry."

Shrugging her shoulders in exasperation, Kyoko had to admit his behavior might have been more understandable if it were caused by hunger. Still . . . his mood was simply dangerous. "Remind me to never cross him when he's hungry, okay?"

"I think you just did." Okita grinned. "Looks like Saito's just a big softie." He turned back to the Yagi residence. "Now that he's gone, I

guess that means we have to try even harder-

He stopped mid-sentence. Little Nobu was gone- the child must have sensed the tension between the two soldiers and silently took off. Kyoko couldn't blame him- the fire behind her previous words were enough to make sparks fly. She hoped she hadn't made too bad of an impression on the boy.

"Hm. Now what?" Okita said, his eyes searching the sky for a clue. Kyoko gulped- the pause for thought enabled her to notice that they were alone. It was rare that she was alone with the captain, and she wasn't able to think of a previous time when they were around each other without anyone else's presence. Perhaps this was the first.

Her mouth opened to make a suggestion, any suggestion, when a familiar voice interrupted their brainstorming.

"Okita." Yamazaki practically teleported in front of them, his voice curt. Kyoko cursed under her breath- her moment alone with the captain only lasted a mere three seconds. "What are you doing?"

Okita chuckled, though it wasn't good-natured. "What do you mean? Did you forget?" he asked wryly. "We're still looking for the cat from earlier."

" . . . Yes, I know. That's not what I was referring to." Yamazaki responded, his words venomous. "I've learned that you haven't reported this situation to Hijikata yet. Why haven't you done so?"

Kyoko rolled her eyes. It wasn't Yamazaki the ninja they were speaking to- it was Yamazaki the Errand Boy of Hijikata conversing in his place. Narrow eyes glared daggers at Okita, and though the man had a composed manner similar to Saito, this sudden aggressive behavior wasn't out of place- not only was Yamazaki unyieldingly loyal to Hijikata, but he and Okita had butted heads several times in the past.

"So you're saying if we tell him about it, it'll magically resolve and we won't have to worry about it anymore?" Okita retorted, sarcasm coating his words.

Yamazaki blinked, speechless for a few moments. "Of course not. But this event has already caused a good deal of trouble for the Shinsengumi. All the food for breakfast is inedible, and in the course of chasing the animal the laundry ended up on the floor." he lectured. Okita picked at his ear casually, his mind already in another universe. "It would be in our best interest to find out what the commander wants done, before matters get worse."

"You little snitch." Kyoko sneered, and Yamazaki's eyes widened in offended shock. "You know that if you tell him, all he's going to do is blame us. I would rather not sit and listen to him yelling at us for hours. I'd rather try to fix everything before he finds out."

Yamazaki's gaze drifted to the ground, his expression a mixture of disapproval and rejection. Another stab of guilt attacked Kyoko, but



she shoved it away- she had to pick her poison. It was either a scolding from Yamazaki or a scolding from Hijikata, and she would choose the ninja's nagging any day.

"Haha! \_Snitch\_. That's a perfect title for you." Okita laughed victoriously. His attitude was almost too smug- Kyoko was close to telling him to tone it down when the captain's mock serious expression returned. "Hey, just think about it for a minute. We don't want the matter to escalate any more than you do. So just let us deal with it, okay?"

With a reluctant nod, Yamazaki met Okita's gaze once more. "I understand . . . However, if this situation worsens further, please report it to the Commander."

"Yeah, yeah." Okita waved him off, and Yamazaki disappeared in a flash of green, as quickly as he had come. It wasn't their worst dispute- in fact, this was likely one of the best interactions the two had had with each other. Okita frowned. "He could at least help us out though . . ."

"Yeah . . . I'm a bit worried he's going to tell Hijikata anyway." Kyoko admitted. Yamazaki was trustworthy, that much was clear- but the man had agreed to their deal a little \_too\_ easily. She yawned, observing her surroundings with passing interest. It was imperative that they figure out another location to search immediately. She was becoming so famished that she could feel her body beginning to gnaw on itself.

"Hey, Kyo!" Okita said, and he sounded so alert that Kyoko snapped out of her reverie. He pointed a finger at a nearby rock, and her heart nearly leaped from her chest- there, basking in the sun, lay the much sought after orange tabby. "Isn't that the cat we're looking for?"

"Yes!" Kyoko hissed, lowering her voice to an excited whisper. Unbelievably, the feline was dozing- now may be their only chance. With a nod of her head, she motioned for Okita to follow her, and the two tiptoed slowly towards the slumbering cat, their breaths shallow.

Suddenly, she halted mid-stride, almost causing Okita to bump into her. The urge was overwhelming her once again, and she struggled to resist, shutting her eyes tight to attempt to block out the temptation. This opportunity was even better than before- the cat was sleeping, its rest so deep that even their previous conversations didn't seem to wake it. The potential reaction was simply too hilarious to ignore. She shouldn't do it. But she had to.

"BAAAAAAAHH!" Kyoko screamed, and the cat jolted from sleep and vaulted straight into the air, its tail as vertical as a board. It was running the second its paws hit the ground, and the cat was out of sight within a millisecond, a yowl of protest signaling its departure.

Both Kyoko and Okita exploded into laughter, the latter dropping onto the grass and rolling with reckless abandon. It was only after their fit inevitably passed that Kyoko realized they were in the same exact position they were in before- without a cat.

"I had no idea you were going to do that!" Okita gasped between chuckles, bending his knees to stand before falling on his rear again, his body too weak from laughter. Kyoko stretched out a hand without thinking, and the captain accepted her invitation, smooth fingers sliding into her palm. It was like the soft hand of a child, but behind it lay the force of a warrior- as he pulled on her hand to lift himself to his feet, Kyoko's strength gave out, and she began to tip forward. She didn't know if it was due to embarrassment or the difference in power between the two, but it was certain- instead of helping him up, he was pulling her down.

The ground slipped from underneath her feet, and she was falling, a downward descent that seemed to last an eternity. Her body collided with his, and his chest felt like a sturdy rock underneath her, her face burying itself into the folds of his clothes. A whiff of smoke and wood- his chores in the kitchen this morning were still evident in his scent.

"Ah!" Kyoko cried, digging her palms into the dirt for leverage. When he broke her fall, he had felt sturdy, but as she scrambled off of him she discovered that her unexpected tumble had left him sprawled in the grass. Her face was hot, and she prayed he hadn't discovered anything in their close encounter.

But he simply grinned, his easygoing expression a cause for relief. "Man, you can't even help up your captain . . . Maybe instead of wandering around the headquarters aimlessly, you can attend your training sessions every once in a while, hm?" he said, sitting up and dragging himself to his feet on his own, brushing off spare blades of grass from the back of his clothes. Kyoko cheeks turned an even darker shade of red- he was aware of her misdeeds the whole time, but for some reason or another, decided not to mention them until now.

"Sorry . . ." Kyoko mumbled under her breath, fixing her gaze on her hands. The recent occurrence had overwhelmed her so entirely that she found herself unable and unwilling to stand, and simply sat there for a while, the heat slowly dissipating from her cheeks.

Okita looked at her, his eyebrows turned up in a mixture of pity and amusement, his playful grin transforming into a gentle smile. "C'mon, that kinda compliant attitude doesn't suit you." he said, and this time he offered a hand to her, his palm facing her invitingly.

After a moment's hesitation she squeezed her hand in his, and with a rush of air she was lifted to her feet, the speed of her ascension almost causing her to stumble again. Okita didn't seem winded at all, and his hand lingered in hers for a second before it retreated to his side. He tore his gaze from hers and idly examined the area around them, scratching the back of his head.

"Well, looks like we lost that cat again." he said, and it was as if Kyoko was being forcibly yanked from her own world and thrown back into the real world. Yes, the cat. They still had to find it.

"I may have just ruined our last chance . . ." Kyoko said, attempting to shake off the self-deprecating mood she had acquired sometime during the last few minutes.

"Whatever." Okita smiled, and his face told all- "Worth it."

Kyoko grinned back at him.

"I'm tempted to just abandon the cat problem . . . But I know that if we do, we'll never hear the end of it if Saito finds us slacking off." Okita sighed, his hands on his hips. "Such a pain in the ass . . ."

Kyoko paused. She didn't want to say it, but if she wanted the task to be done, she had to. "How about we look in the courtyard again?" she suggested. She had wanted to avoid the area like the plague, in fear that the foreign girl's hidden exit would be revealed- but she knew that the cat's fondness for her would likely lead it there.

Okita shrugged. "All right."

The two headed to the courtyard in silence, the only noise being intermittent stomach rumblings. Upon their arrival, they found the area deserted, and though it seemed completely void of movement, Kyoko agreed to split up and thoroughly explore both sides of the courtyard at once. Her body relaxed once she was apart from the captain- she hadn't realized how tense she was in his presence until now.

"\_Do not scare the cat if you find it, do not scare the cat if you find it . . .\_" Kyoko chanted silently to herself, upturning bushes and craning her neck to peer at the tops of trees. She couldn't screw up this time- far too much effort had been put into this already. They had to catch it at all costs.

Tapping her foot on the ground, she inspected her surroundings. She was running out of places to search. Then it hit her. Cats not only preferred high places, but secluded places as well- even if it was the lowest possible location you could look for. Kyoko knelt and pressed her body to the dirt, scanning the area underneath the house's foundation. At first she saw only earth and pillars- if the tabby wandered too far under the building, it would be hard to find someone willing to crawl after it. But then she saw a flicker of orange.

The cat lay curled into a ball, dirt streaking its bright fur. Its breathing was rhythmic and slow- it was sleeping again. Kyoko crawled over to the animal, keeping her motions small and quiet. She opened her mouth to call over to Okita that they'd found their target, but snapped it shut again- shouting would only scare it, and it was possible that the cat would only scamper further underneath the building. As she neared its dozing form, she reached out a hand to grab it-

One light touch of its fur jolted it from its slumber, and it bolted out from underneath the Shinsengumi residence and past Kyoko, its little legs moving furiously. "Dam- ow!" Kyoko moved to stand and slammed her head against part of the building's structure, stars littering her vision. Rubbing her bruised head, she sped after the cat, who had thankfully chosen to race into the building instead of underneath it. "Stupid cat! C'mere!"

She dashed through the common room and into the hallway, steadily

beginning to close in on the animal when it abruptly jumped- right into the arms of the golden-haired woman. Kyoko skidded to a stop, her mouth agape.

The cat wriggled affectionately in her arms, pushing its head against her neck, its expression one of pure bliss. The girl stroked the animal protectively, her sharp red eyes squinting at Kyoko with suspicion. Behind her stood the other guest, her long brown hair dangling over her shoulders, the look in her eyes more fearful than wary.

At first Kyoko couldn't find her voice, the words trapped inside her chest. Finally, she broke the silence. "Thank god." she sighed, forcing a relieved smile to stretch her lips. "That thing never stops running."

The foreigner's face didn't budge an inch. "You're scaring him. Of course he's gonna run if you chase him." she said, her tone almost scolding. Kyoko flinched- even after one exchange, communicating with the girl felt like a humongous weight was pressing down on her chest.

"Your pet's really causing a lot of trouble, you know!" Kyoko said, keeping her grin and forcing her words to sound light. She wasn't here to berate them, nor did she mean to punish them- it wasn't her job to do so anyway. But the problem did need to be addressed.

"It was your fault to begin with." the girl shot back, and Kyoko flinched again- it was true. It may have been the girl's cat, but Kyoko was the one who gave in to temptation and frightened it . . . multiple times.

"Yeah, I guess. I just couldn't control myself though . . ." Kyoko shrugged, the joy she experienced from scaring it rushing to lift her heart again. The girl didn't seem to expect this reaction- her eyes widened, and her guard lowered just a tiny bit. Perhaps she had expected Kyoko to deny her own involvement in the matter. Kyoko continued, her voice lowering in displeasure. "Anyway, I ended up paying for it later . . ."

As if to provide evidence, her stomach growled loudly.

"Oh my! Just how much trouble have we caused?" the brunette asked, stepping forward to stand side by side with her roommate. She had been partly obscured by her companion until now, as if using her as a shield, and by the look on the other girl's face she was perfectly willing to act as one.

"Well, breakfast is gone, the clean laundry was knocked in the dirt, a kid was crying, and I'm surprised I haven't gotten a concussion after the times I hit my head trying to catch it . . ." Kyoko listed off, counting the feline's crimes with her fingers. The girls looked progressively more nauseous with each word, and she stopped, waving her hand away as if shaking off the grievances. "Don't worry! No one knows it came from your room." she assured them, and she observed the brown-haired girl's shoulders sag with relief. The woman holding the cat didn't alter her position, and only glared at Kyoko with narrowed eyes. ". . . And I won't tell anyone." Kyoko finished, and she felt the girl's hot gaze leave her.

"Oh, we'd be very grateful!" the brunette gushed, dipping into a polite bow. "My name is Sae Tsukishima, of the Tsukishima clan! I'm pleased to make your acquaintance!" After her abrupt introduction, Sae turned to her friend expectantly. The blonde stared at her reproachfully for a few moments before emitting a defeated sigh- she had obviously expected this encounter to be over by now.

Finally she relented. "Satomi Sayashi." she said, shifting her arms to accommodate the troublesome cat as it changed positions.

"I'm Kyo Tsugunaga!" Kyoko said, her polite smile spreading into a genuine one. Satomi's eyebrow raised as soon as the words were out of her mouth, and Kyoko felt the woman not only peer at her, but \_into\_ her, her crimson eyes gleaming with curiosity. Kyoko cleared her throat nervously, seeking a distraction. "Man, that cat really seems to like you!"

The diversion worked- Satomi turned her attention to the animal cradled in her arms, an affectionate smile bringing out the soft beauty in her features. "He's been coming here for a while." she said, as if this would explain the cat's fondness for her. Sae reached out a hand to stroke the animal, her motion reciprocated with a friendly nudge of the head.

"What are you two doing out of your room by yourselves? Do you \_want\_ to be killed?"

Sae blanched, and Satomi glared warily at the space behind Kyoko- Kyoko turned around to see Okita looking mildly displeased and befuddled, his arms crossed in front of him. She scrambled for a response that would allow the girls to leave unharmed.

"They can be out if they're accompanied by a captain, remember?" Kyoko said with a sly smirk. She pointed a finger at him. "And what are \_youuuu\_?"

Okita sighed in exasperation, but his old smile started to return. "That doesn't change the fact that they were out by themselves before I came along . . ." he countered, but he seemed strangely placated- Kyoko wasn't sure if it was because the cat was finally captured or if he was simply in a good mood. "Well, I guess we gotta hand over this cat and tell the others they can stop searching."

Satomi squeezed the cat protectively to her chest, her expression crestfallen. "And then what will happen to it?"

"Dunno." Okita shrugged. A roguish grin appeared on his face. "After all the wasted food and empty stomachs, I'm betting some of these guys wanna skin it alive."

Satomi visibly recoiled. "\_Or\_ we can just let it go and leave it be?" she suggested, her words tumbling out with an ounce of barely controlled aggression. "It's been roaming this area and minding its own business for weeks. It will probably stay out of the way as long as no one \_scares\_ it."

She aimed the last few words at Kyoko with an indignant glance. Kyoko responded with nervous laughter. "I don't see a problem with it." she said, jumping to Satomi's defense. "'Course you'll probably have to hide it in your room until tensions die down and people stop

searching for it . . ."

"Whoa whoa, I don't think everyone's gonna agree to this idea." Okita said, his crossed arm indicating his stance on the matter.

"That's why it'll be our little secret!" Kyoko winked. "We never saw it, \_right\_?"

Okita scratched his head, and Kyoko could tell exasperation was turning into exhaustion. "Somebody's bound to find it eventually." he continued, and his next thought seemed to give him delight. "Depending on who finds him, it's lights out for kitty!"

"At least this way it has a chance!" Satomi argued, and Kyoko wordlessly pulled the cat into her arms, the blonde resisting for a moment before giving it up with some reluctance. Holding the squirming cat up to the captain, Kyoko performed her best imitation of a pleading child.

"C'mon, you really wanna throw \_this\_ into the fire?" she cooed, and took one of the cat's soft front legs in her fist, waving it to and fro emphatically. She turned the pitch of her voice up a couple of notches and hid her face behind the cat's. "'\_Please don't hand me over, captain!\_" the "cat" said. "\_I'm-'"

"\_Rowr!\_" the tabby yowled, swiping and clawing through air before eventually tearing from Kyoko's grasp and lunging for Satomi, who caught the frightened animal with ease. Okita's face contorted, his composure broken with a loud snort and then a laugh.

"Okay \_fine\_." he said, and the collective strain of the group released with a simultaneous sigh of relief. But his expression remained solemn. "But don't whine if the cat causes trouble again and it goes bye-bye for good."

"Thank you very much!" Sae said, bowing multiple times in gratitude. Satomi followed her example with less gusto, her slow bow allowing the cat to scale her shoulder.

"Now, you two, back to your room." Okita said before grinning maliciously. "Before kitty becomes the replacement breakfast."

With that the two rushed off, the view of their ornately tied obis growing smaller with each step. The cat peeked at Kyoko over Satomi's shoulder, its eyes accusatory. "See ya!" Kyoko called to them as they retreated around a corner- their journey to the storage room would be a short one, and she hoped they wouldn't encounter anyone on their path.

Once they were out of sight, Kyoko turned to Okita with a devious smirk. "Well, well. Looks like Saito's not the only big softie."

An uncharacteristic pink hue spread over Okita's cheeks, and Kyoko stopped breathing- she had never seen the man blush before, nor experience shame over anything for that matter. She didn't get to ogle it for long- Okita treated her to a light shove, easily causing her to topple over and hit the hard floor below her. "Get back to work, Tsugunaga!" she heard him shout as he walked away, mocking laughter following in its wake.

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The Shinsengumi residence appeared threatening when shrouded in darkness, the entire building cloaked in silence save for a few bouts of light snoring. Kyoko slipped from room to room, her footsteps inaudible. She tiptoed carefully through the night, her nerves on edge, until she had finally reached her destination. Sifting through cupboards, lifting lids and opening drawers, Kyoko scrounged for food, her stomach twinging with hunger.

Harada and Nagakura had somehow managed to salvage breakfast that morning, but none of the members of the Cat Search Team had arrived on time to enjoy it. Her eating schedule completely thrown off, hunger came to haunt Kyoko in the middle of the night, its cries for sustenance persistent and unyielding. She was eventually forced to slink over her fellow soldiers and sneak into the kitchen, praying that she would be able to find something to last her through the night.

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"_snk snk snk snk_ . . . ."
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Kyoko froze. She wasn't sure if she'd really heard it- she was in the midst of opening a cabinet, and the familiar noise had occurred mid-creak.

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"Here kitty! _snk snk snk_ . . . "
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There was no mistake- Satomi was wandering through the building somewhere, calling for her newfound pet. "\_Dammit!\_" Kyoko thought, almost slamming the cabinet shut. "\_Did she really lose that cat already?!\_" If it was already suspicious enough for Kyoko to spontaneously stroll through headquarters late at night, then it was just plain deadly for Satomi to be doing it. She wouldn't put it past any of the captains to assume she was up to something devious and murder her on sight. Either the girl was extremely brave or had a death wish.

"I've got to find her before someone else does . . .\_" Kyoko thought, slipping back into the corridor. Her rumbling stomach would have to wait.

Tiptoeing through the hallways, she squinted through the darkness. There were only so many unoccupied locations within the building she could search- if Satomi dared to examine one with people in it, even Kyoko wouldn't be able to help her. After a few minutes of aimless wandering, she heard an indiscernible whisper floating in from the outside. Deciding to follow the only clue she had, Kyoko headed in that direction- perhaps the girl had already found the cat and was now speaking to it.

She had only taken one step outside before she leaped back in again, pushing her back against the wall that would conceal her. A startled gasp almost jumped from her chest and she struggled to swallow her voice, her heart racing.

Vice-Commander Hijikata was lounging outside, his back to Kyoko. He was whispering something she was far too terrified to make out. Kyoko dared to sidle along the wall, risking a quick peek outside to establish who he was conversing with- after all, if it was Kondou,

she still had a chance to get out of this unscathed. What she saw almost elicited a scream- the Demon Hijikata was talking to Satomi's feline companion, who savored every touch of the man's hand on its head and neck.

"It'd be a pain in the ass to get attached, so you better get out of here quickly." the Vice-Commander was saying, his voice surprisingly gentle. "This is the headquarters of the Shinsengumi. It's no place for a cat and we can't afford to be distracted. So go on, find a place on your own somewhere else. Maybe try a nest. Heard they're pretty comfortable." His words contained a small smile within them.

"\_Crap, he found it . . .\_" Kyoko thought, letting her head lean against the wall behind her. But it could have been worse- it didn't seem like Hijikata would chop it into little pieces like Okita alluded to. In fact he almost seemed . . . fond of the animal. It was a trait she hadn't expected of his authoritative nature.

Despite this, it seemed even animals weren't immune to obeying Hijikata- as if the cat understood his words, it let out one last cry before its footstep padded off into the distance.

There was a pause, and for a moment Kyoko only heard the howl of the night wind in the distance. Then Hijikata spoke, his words slow and deliberate. "Like the last precious autumn leaves, it's gone . . ."

Kyoko held back a snort, clamping her hand over her mouth. If she made even a peep he'd find her- and after a dramatic phrase like that, she didn't know what he would do if he found out she'd been listening. "\_Pull yourself together, Kyoko!\_" she told herself, pushing the laughter back down to her chest. Her chest . . . "\_Oh my god!\_" she thought, shock forcing air between her fingers. She had just realized she left her chest unbanded underneath her clothes- if she was discovered now and he dared to look any lower than eye level, it wouldn't be just a lecture she'd receive. She squeezed her eyes shut, nervous tears threatening to fall. "\_If I'm found I might really die!\_"

There was a rustle of papers, and Kyoko risked another glimpse outside- Apparently hit with a burst of inspiration, Hijikata was scribbling furiously in a ratty old notebook, his intense expression threatening to set the pages on fire.

"\_Now's my chance!\_" Kyoko thought, taking one cautious step in the other direction- if the floor uttered even a small creak, it would be over. Her toe just managed to touch the ground in front of her when Hijikata suddenly stood, and Kyoko pressed herself against the wall again, the force of her effort causing a ripple of pain to travel up her spine. "\_Dammit!\_"

Another pause. For a moment Kyoko believed she had been found out- but then Hijikata spoke to himself again. "Carried away by the wind, never to be seen again . . ." he whispered, snapping the old notebook shut. Then he walked toward the entrance of the building, his footsteps quickly approaching her location.

Kyoko couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She would be found.  
"\_No-!\_"



"Can I have this?"

Air returned to her lungs. She turned to see Satomi standing in front of Hijikata, the orange tabby who had seemingly departed earlier dangling loosely from her hands. The Vice-Commander was speechless, and never had Kyoko seen the man so utterly petrified in all of the years she'd been working under him. If she hadn't just narrowly avoided a deadly situation, she would be in tears.

It didn't take long for him to recover. "No." he sputtered, charging past both her and Kyoko and headed to his room. The enormous pressure lifted from Kyoko's chest- he didn't even notice her.

Satomi followed him, still holding the cat from under its arms, its bottom half wobbling. "Please?!"

The door to Hijikata's room snapped shut in her face, and the girl stood there for a moment in silence, her furry friend finally managing to squirm around and perch on her shoulder. Then she began to knock on the wooden frame of the door with her knuckles, the incessant \_knok knok knok\_ echoing through the quiet corridors.

Kyoko's mouth was ajar. Despite finding her by herself in the dead of night, he was willingly refusing to punish her. Yet she still continued with her request, regardless of her bountiful luck. It was settled- Satomi definitely had a death wish.

Finally, Hijikata's door slid open. "\_No.\_" he said before she could utter a word, and the door began to shut again when Satomi shoved her foot into the gap, preventing it from closing. A spark of rage crossed Hijikata's face- now she was pushing her limits. Kyoko remained hidden, unable to tear her gaze from the impending train wreck.

"Okay, I admit the cat's been visiting for weeks. And he caused a lot of trouble this morning." Satomi said, her voice pleading. Kyoko flinched- Hijikata didn't know about any of the mess the cat caused, and now it looked like all of their efforts to conceal it would be wasted. "But he doesn't cause trouble unless he's chased! Please!"

"You not only stubbornly refuse to listen to my orders, but you're also out by yourself unattended. Do you know what such insubordination does to me?" Hijikata growled, the volume of his voice rising with each word. "It makes me \_angry\_."

"What harm would it do to just let him hang around?" Satomi persisted, her voice trembling. Either the fear of Hijikata's wrath was getting to her or she was simply that emotional over the cat's well-being. As if on cue, the cat let out a doleful cry.

Kyoko couldn't see her face, but whatever expression she was making must have persuaded him- Hijikata sighed, rubbing the center of his forehead. ". . . Fine. If it causes trouble once, it's gone."

"Yes!" Satomi cried, lifting the cat merrily into the air before hugging it to her chest. The animal rubbed its head enthusiastically on her pale cheek, its tail shaking with excitement. "You're staying

with me, kitty!"

Hijikata gazed at her tenderly, his eyebrows curled up in bemusement, but his voice remained firm. "Now go to bed." he urged, shutting his door for the final time that night.

"Yes sir!" Satomi headed in Kyoko's direction, practically skipping. Kyoko froze. Perhaps if she remained motionless in the shadows, Satomi wouldn't spot-

"You can come out now, Kyo!" Satomi chirped, scratching her pet rigorously behind the ears. Kyoko swallowed. She wasn't aware the girl knew she was there the whole time, though she supposed it didn't matter- it only mattered if Hijikata had found her. Crossing her arms to conceal her chest, she stepped out of her hiding place, and though the situation warranted a decent explanation, Kyoko had only one thing to tell her.

"Damn, girl. You got some \_balls\_."

[illegible]

**\*\*Author's note:\*\***

**\*\*Thanks to all the readers and followers! At 10,400 words, this is by far the longest chapter I have written in any of the stories I've created! Phew!\*\***

**\*\*Hope you enjoyed, and leave a review to let me know what you think!\*\***

End  
file.